



TO THE VALIANT



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by
Norah C. James

Author of "SLEEVELESS ERRAND"

1930



YORK

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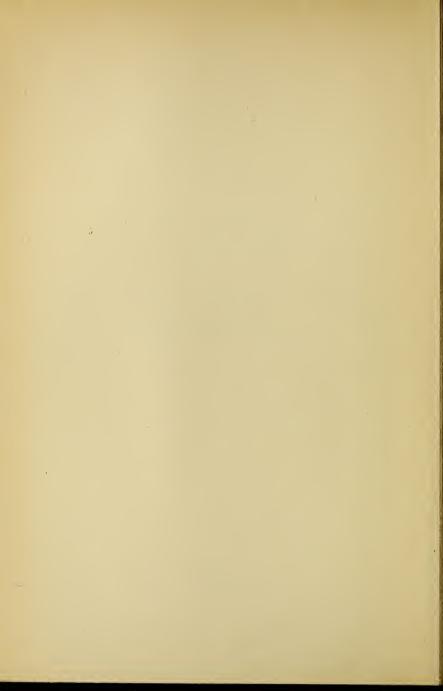
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TO YOU ...

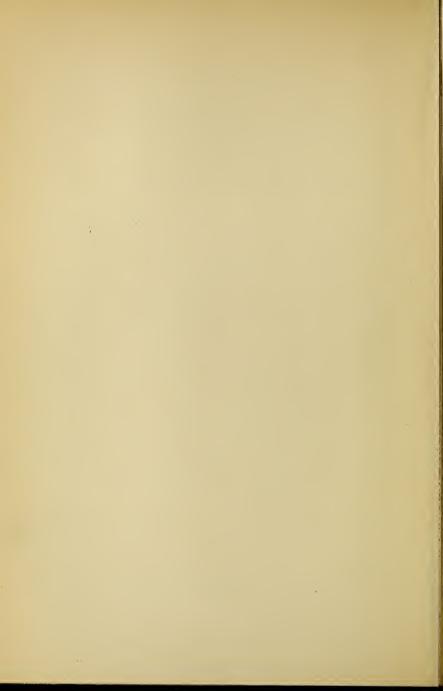
"—and I shall think of you
Whenever I am most happy, whenever I am
Most sad, whenever I see a beautiful thing.
You are a burning lamp to me, a flame
The wind cannot blow out, and I shall hold
you

High in my hand against whatever darkness."

The Lamp and the Bell, by Edna St. Vincent Millay.



PART ONE



CHAPTER I

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THE whirring of the alarm clock shattered the stillness. Lucy started up as she did every morning. She wished confusedly that it would stop. Without looking, her hand found the lever beside the bell. She pushed it over and the din ceased. The sound still jangled in her mind, though she was fully awake. She looked towards the window and thought:

"That sky means good weather. It's going to be sunny again. Maybe, with luck, I can get the ironing done to-night. That'll give me more time with Fred to-morrow. If they go to Ware in the afternoon, I can get cleaned up quickly. Then me and him can meet by four o'clock. 'Course that's if he's working in the Long Field. If he's near the farm and old Wedderburn don't go to market, we may be seen. It'd be all up if that happened. Old Wedderburn do be a hard one for work." She stretched hard, then sat up yawning. The iron bedstead creaked.

The room was small. The ceiling sloped up and down in a crazy series of angles. It was a very old room. The wide honey-colored oak floor-boards curved downwards towards the window. A strip of

faded carpet lay beside the bed and there was another piece in front of the rickety chest of drawers. On this stood a small spotted mirror. There was a chair with a large hole in its cane seat by the bed. The wardrobe consisted of four hooks behind the door. On the chest of drawers were three photo-One, frameless, of Fred; the second, a graphs. group, in which a large-eyed child, on a fat woman's lap, bore a strong resemblance to Lucy; and the third, a faded snapshot of a sheep dog. A muchworn hair-brush and a comb, from which many of the teeth were missing, lay in front of the photographs. A few shabby garments were hung neatly over the chair. A shrunken muslin curtain across the window fluttered in the breeze.

Lucy got out of bed with a sudden rush. She stripped off the sheets and blankets and pulled the head of the mattress over the foot. Then she dressed, brushed her dark hair vigorously, and went out of the room to wash in the kitchen. She went downstairs on her stockinged feet, for it was only half-past five and the master would still be asleep. When she got to the hall below, Don, the half-breed sheep dog, rose from the rug where he had been lying. He wagged his tail as he followed her to the kitchen to be let out. In the early morning light the

room looked unreal. Each of the copper pots on the shelf over the huge fireplace held a picture of the room in miniature. The crockery on the dresser shone with an unearthly whiteness. Every highlight was a little exaggerated, every shadow intensified. The tiles on the floor had mellowed with age to pale mauve.

Lucy went over to the back door leading to the garden. She drew the heavy bolt. Don gave a short deep bark of excitement.

"Hush, silly," she whispered, "you'll wake them up." He flopped down on his haunches as she struggled with the fastening. His tail thumped and thumped on the floor. When she opened the door he bounded out past her. She saw him leaping over the mistress's flower beds.

"Tch—tch," she said in a vexed way and thought: "That'll most likely finish off them pansy roots. He's a clumsy thing." A breath of fragrant air blew upon her face. It carried with it the dewy scent of stocks and pinks. She thought: "The mistress do love her garden," and then, "My, it does smell good this morning. Like that bottle of scent Fred won at the Fair last year."

She got some kindling wood from the store in the shed outside the kitchen. After she had started the

fire in the stove, she lit the oil cooker and put a small kettle over the flame for the early morning cups of tea. Then she fetched some water from the rain barrel outside. She poured it into a basin which she set in the sink. She took off her dress and washed herself. She washed her teeth too, putting a little soap on the brush first. The taste of the lather always made her grimace and she rinsed her mouth quickly. She thought:

"There's only four eggs left. I must rush out to the barn and see what I can find. If that devil Matilda would only lay where she's supposed to, it'd make life a lot easier. My blue muslin needs ironing. It got creased last Sunday." Lucy gazed out of the window, but she saw nothing as the thoughts ran through her head.

The land sloped gently away from the farm. The garden hedge was like a wall against the green sea of the pastures. A sea which rolled right up to its base. Sometimes in the summer, when the grass was high, the wind came running across it. Then as far as the eye could see the surface rippled and broke like water. Again it was like the sea in the autumn, when the mist came up from the river thick and white. Only then the hedge disappeared and the walls of the house itself were engulfed. In the win-

ter time, at night, when the snow lay over the fields, the stars glittered and the moon rose about a still white frozen ocean. That was beautiful too. was in the spring though, that the pastures really seemed more like water than land. When the elm trees dividing field from field, turned from the black etchings of winter to warm sepia, a miracle that happened always in a single night. One moment the boughs were carved ebony against the gray sky, and the next they had become alive, with the rooks circling round, cawing endlessly. It was then that the spring seemed to rise in a high tide, till the pastures broke in wave after wave of green upon the farm. So that there was a spray of vivid buds upon the hedge and even the walls were splattered with blossom.

Lucy put on her dress again. She set the table for breakfast. She made a pot of tea and left it on the hob whilst she got three of the big cups and saucers from the dresser. Then she filled them and took two up to Mr. and Mrs. Leekey's bedroom. She knocked loudly at their door and shouted:

"Your tea, Mum," and put the cups on the table that stood in the passage. Then she went downstairs. The next five minutes was a time prized by Lucy. For hers was a busy life, which began at five o'clock and only ended some seventeen hours later. These five minutes were your own; a time when you could stand or sit, think your own thoughts and do nothing. The Leekeys were good and kind employers, but you were always at their beck and call. Lucy thought:

"My, it would be fine if Fred could marry me in a year's time. I'd have a second name of my own too, like all the rest. I'd like to have two names I would." She stood with one foot resting on the iron fender before the fire, sipping the hot tea. The fire crackled. Now and then, as a tongue of flame curled around a piece of wood containing sap, a soft hiss broke the silence. The firelight glinted upon Lucy's black hair, it danced from the corner of her gently full lips to her straight nose and wide eyebrows. Her hands were not large. Better shaped than is usual in English peasant girls. She finished the tea and put the cup in the wash-basin in the scullery.

"Now for them eggs," she thought and hurried out to the yard. By and by she came back carrying six big ones in her apron. Mrs. Leekey was in the kitchen surveying with satisfaction its cleanliness and the preparations for breakfast. She was a stout woman with white hair. She smiled cheerfully as

Lucy came in. She was a good-natured gossip, with a coarse sense of humor that made her well liked by men, though her company was also much sought after by the women of Little Elmbury. She was always in possession of the latest news of her neighbors and yet was kindly. Lucy grinned back.

"There's a good drying wind, Mum," she said. "Maria's had her kittens, Mum. I see'd her just now slinking by with one of them in her mouth."

"Oh, well, we must find out where she's hid them later. Won't do to leave 'em too long before we drown them. Poor old Maria. It does seem a waste. We can let her keep one, though, this time. Tim's getting past his work. We can do with another good cat, and I will say that for Maria, she does breed good mousers."

"Yes'm."

"I wonder, Lucy, if Mrs. Whitburn has had her baby yet? It's two days overdue according to her." "Yes'm."

"I think the master would like a nice bit of bacon this morning. Not cooked too much, with a thick slice of fried bread. You know how he likes it."

"Yes'm."

"And, Lucy, we'll be going over to market to-

morrow with the Wedderburns, so you'll be able to get clear early perhaps."

"Yes, thanks, Mum."

"How's Fred, Lucy?"

"He's nicely, thank you, Mum." During this conversation both of them had been going on with the preparations for the meal. Mrs. Leekey thought:

"It's lucky she's a good girl as well as a good looker. She could play up the dickens with the men around here. There's not a girl for miles can touch her for looks. Funny that we never found out for sure who her father was. But Rosie Piggot was a secretive sort of woman. However, for me, I'd have taken an oath it was Mr. Morden's son. Lucy's got a dark keen look to her that's uncommon like the Squire's. Oh, well, I suppose it'll never be known now." Lucy thought gratefully:

"The Missus is a good sort. Thinking about me getting off early to-morrow and asking about Fred."

The kettle lid was lifting up and down when John Leekey came in. He was a big man, brown faced. He had a quick temper that was violent while it lasted, but soon over. Both his boys had gone into the army and been killed in India. Because of that, he had conceived a hatred of the Government which

was not to be cured by the return to power of a new one. He was against all Governments. Had he not been forced by powers he was unable to withstand to lose two good wage-earners, whom he had also loved?

"Morning, Lucy, weather'll hold by the look of things," he said, tapping the barometer gently.

"Morning, master," Lucy said. In a few minutes the three sat down to breakfast.

"Ben been in yet, Lucy?"

"No."

"Wonder if Bessie's all right. She ought to have a good calf, that cow ought." They ate in silence, stolidly and heavily. Outside the breeze and the sunshine danced together. Over the leaves and flowers, across the rippling water in the duck-pond, upon the plumage of the pigeons in flight. The whole world sparkled. It was a good day in July.

By-and-by the heavy clop-clop of the cowman's boots sounded approaching the kitchen door. Leekey pushed back his chair and got up. He was worried about the cow. It was her first calf. He went over to the door and opened it. Ben stood outside. The cowman was young. He had a dreamy expression in his eyes. It was said in Little Elmbury that he was not quite right in his head.

Mrs. Hinks, who for some time had let him a room at the back of her sweet-shop, told how some nights he spoke aloud to himself. That he talked to men whose names were unknown in the village. She got scared, because it seemed that the people he conversed with had died. Men who had been killed violently and horribly by Ben's side. For he too had been in India. At first the villagers had resented his reappearance amongst them. For he had been reported killed and his name added to the Roll of Honor that hung in the church. Then one day he had come back, with a far-away look in his eyes. As Mrs. Hinks said:

"It gave you the creeps. It was for all the world as if he had returned from Beyond." Fred had shared his rooms with him when Mrs. Hinks turned him out, till Leekey took him on as cowman. Other farmers shook their heads. It was all very well to do what you could for the poor fellows who'd been in the Army. But a man officially dead! Well, it was rather too much of a good thing. Besides, he was daft and said openly that he didn't believe in God any more. Told the vicar he'd been through Hell and knew for certain sure there couldn't be a God. If the children hadn't liked him, and if he hadn't been such a good cowman, and if Fred hadn't

stood by him, then probably public opinion would have driven the frail-minded Ben out of Little Elmbury. As it was, he lived a happy useful life. Even if a large part of his mind did seem attached somewhere else. And he served the Leekeys with a dog-like devotion.

Ben stood against the sunshine that streamed in through the door. His skin was deeply tanned, but the down upon his cheeks was golden. It gave a luminous outline to his face.

"Morning, Master," he said.

"Morning, Ben. How's Bessie?"

"She's had a lovely calf, Master. Near to sunrise. I nearly ran up here for you. Just before her labor was over."

"She's all right, Ben?"

"Yes, she's all right. She were feeding the young 'un when I came away a moment back." Mrs. Leekey came over to the door.

"Now, Ben, you're to have a good breakfast. You must be fair wore out." The young man shook his head.

"No, thanks, Mum. I don't feel hungry."

"Well, a cup of tea, then."

"Thank you, Mum, I'd not say no to a cup of tea."

"Good; then come in." He did so and sat down in the place Lucy cleared for him. Mrs. Leekey poured out some tea and handed it to him.

"What color's the calf?"

"Black, Mum. 'Cept for a white patch between the eyes. It's a real little beauty." After Ben had finished his tea, he went with Leekey to the cowshed. When they had gone the women started on the day's work. Mrs. Leekey fed the chickens and ducks. Then she went to the kitchen garden to see that all was well with the vegetables. Lucy did the housework. Next it was time to get the mid-day dinner ready. When that was cleared away, Lucy finished the washing she had left over from the day before. As she pegged up a petticoat of Mrs. Leekey's she thought:

"I'll have to take down most of this lot 'cos it's been such a good drying day they'll need damping afore I iron 'em."

The sun poured down. Two birds darted over her head, twittering and fighting. She thought:

"They be having a love-fight. Late in the season for that I should have thought. This weather's too good to last. Oh! I do hope as it'll keep fine for Fred and me. I wonder if he's thinking of to-morrow? I love 'im, I love 'im, I love 'im. I am a

sloppy one to be thinking that, but I do all the same." Don jumped over the wall at her side. She turned back to the basket to pick up another garment and stroked his head as she passed. He waited a moment to see if she would notice him again, and then when she did not, he walked over to a patch of shade beneath a rose bush and lay down. She thought:

"I love to feel your hands touching me, Fred. I wish we was married and could get all this want worked out of us proper. It's a strain on both of us. The parson and such-like may say it's a sin for a man and girl to want each other, but p'raps they forget how folks like me and Fred resist."

In the distance someone shouted. The dog's ears pricked up for a moment, then dropped again lazily.

"If a girl did get into trouble," her thoughts ran on, "I'd never turn and sneer at her, not I. Now I know how difficult it is not to let yourself do what you want. Sometimes when it's dark and you kiss each other close so that you can't remember which of you is which, then anything might happen, if the chap didn't keep his head and not take all of you."

She saw Maria slipping into the house, carrying in her mouth a limp kitten. Don took no notice,

though he followed the cat with his gold-flecked eyes. Lucy thought:

"It does seem a shame, the poor thing's so terrified of us getting her young. Doesn't seem right somehow that we should have the power to take them from her. But there, I suppose God knew what He was about when He made us all. Well, Maria, I'll not tell missus. Bet you'll hide them in my room."

By tea-time Lucy was tired out, for the day had been hot. Ben came into the kitchen as she was washing up.

"Be Fred coming here to-night, Lucy?"

"I don't expect so. 'Tis cricket club practice. Perhaps he'll look in later, but it's not likely."

"It's said that Wedderburn be leading Fred a dance."

"So he's told me."

"Fred shouldn't stay with him."

"Jobs be hard to come by, Ben, and besides, he's nigh here, which is something."

"That's so."

Lucy felt at ease with Ben; his dreamy gaze, which looked through you, was a relief from the hot glances most of the young men of the village cast. She thought:

"Ben be a real nice fellow. He don't make me

feel prickly all over like what other chaps do when they get a larking."

"I shall miss you when you're married, Lucy, and gone away with Fred."

"Why, whatever do you mean, Ben? Me and Fred won't get spliced for many a year, and then we'll be living in Little Elmbury just as now, I s'ppose."

The cowman shook his head. "You'll be married to Fred before much longer, I'm be thinking, and you'll go away from here."

Lucy thought:

"Now, why should he be thinking that? Me and Fred married and going away from Little Elmbury. My! but I do wish it could be so."

She looked at him and her cheeks flushed.

"What has come to you, Ben, for to say a wild thing like that?"

"I don't know as it is wild," he said slowly, "but we'll see, for the blood be hot and hasty at twenty and Fred is a mortal man. Nature knows how to work her spells in the summer weather, and you and Fred'll not withstand her."

Mrs. Leekey called from upstairs and Lucy hurried out of the kitchen.

The evening sun slanted richly through the win-

dow. It lit up the young man's face. He blinked, and went out into the garden and down the path.

That night at ten o'clock Lucy walked up the stairs to bed heavily. The stars shone out of the sky bright and clear. Some of them seemed quite close. Lucy undressed in the dark. She thought:

"If I light the candle the moths will flutter in and blunder in the flame."

A light breeze swayed the muslin curtain. Beneath the chest of drawers two points of light glittered fiercely. When Lucy stooped to take off her shoes she saw them.

"Maria," she said. Then again, "Come out of there, Maria, you'll be hungry."

She yawned, then sighed and slipped her dress on again.

"You wait here, Maria, and I'll fetch you a drop of milk."

She came back with a bowl half full. The cat crept out from under the chest of drawers. It began to lap thirstily. A faint mewing sounded from the darkness and Lucy struck a match and bent down to look. The cat followed her movements out of the corner of its eye as it lapped. She had just made out the blurred shape of four kittens before the flame flickered away. She thought:

"Four of 'em. Oh, Maria!"

She pulled out a drawer above. She fumbled about until she had found the bag in which she kept bits of material for patching and mending. She thought:

"That piece of old flannel petticoat of mine will do grand."

When she found it, she pushed it under the chest of drawers. She knew that the cat would lie on it with her kittens if she wanted to. After that Lucy finished undressing and got into bed. Her body ached with fatigue. In her mind there drifted a medley of thoughts, and one led to another, which in turn led to a new association, so that waves of thought rose and receded in her brain. As sleep began to overtake her the sequence was lost, and people and names and ideas became unattached and con-They hovered up and down, each one isolated, until they sank unnoticed into her subconscious mind. Fred-to-morrow she would see him —he would kiss her and she would stroke his cheeks, which always felt prickly—they'd walk in the fields -leaves in July were always so thick-no one could see you, they made such a screen—how long does it take before the grasses straighten up again after you've been sitting on them-would they straighten

TO THE VALIANT

as you looked, or was it like a watch hand that you can't see moving?—must tell missus some new dusters needed—she can get them at Ware to-morrow, not at Dentons, the last from there wore out so quick—Maria—wonder if she's lying on the petticoat—shining eyes she'd got in the dark—they looked like—like—She fell asleep to the soft sound of purring from the cat as she suckled her kittens.

CHAPTER II

It was four o'clock in the afternoon. The day was glorious. The narrow path by the field ran brown and uneven in front of Lucy. She walked carefully. In some places the sprays from the brambles strayed perilously over the path. She had torn her frock that way before. By-and-by the path turned and went through the gap in the hedge. Fred was in the field beyond. He saw her coming and waved, then turned again to his job of widening the ditch. When she was quite close to him he threw down his spade and wiped his hands on the side of his corduroys. Lucy watched him admiringly. His shirt was wide open and his tanned chest bronze with hair.

"It's hot, Fred."

"It is." His eyes brightened as he looked at her. "You're early."

"I got cleared quick. Old Wedderburn went in the trap with missus and master."

"Did he now? Then give us a kiss, Lucy."

She stepped closer and he put one hand behind her neck and one around her shoulders. His lips pressed upon hers. The field which had seemed silent as they spoke, now, in their silence, hummed with the drone of bees and the chirruping of the grasshoppers. Fred drew away first.

"You be lovely to-day, Luce." He was breathing quickly.

"Be I, Fred?"

She was acutely conscious of his body, and her own tingled.

"Sit down awhile till I've finished this here ditch. There only be a few feet more or so."

So she sat down. Fred took up the spade again and struck it violently into the hard earth. The stones rattled sharply against the metal. He thought:

"Her mouth do make me giddy like, it's soft and lovely. Her kisses do come back hot."

Lucy gazed at the green floor of the meadow while she got her breath. She thought:

"A kiss makes you feel all melted like."

She saw how the tiny insects were moving everywhere within the grasses. One, a minute shining emerald creature, ran up a stalk of clover and from there on to her hand. Its legs tickled her skin and she blew it off. She looked closer at this other world that existed under her eyes. She thought:

"How criss-cross all them stems be, yet each is clear enough at its root. It's the tops as gets tangled. How everything shines! These here stems be polished just like the insects and things. Come to that, almost everything you can think of is shiny one way or the other. Wet or dry the polish still be there. Even the cows. Their sides do glisten when it rains and when the sun's on them. Ben was right about Bessie's calf, it's a little beauty. Now what's old Wedderburn been saying to Fred, for to make Ben start on about him last night?"

She watched Fred at his digging. He was big and strongly made, there was a ruddy glint in his hair. He swung the spade up high before bringing it down, so that it sank beneath the force of the blow into the hard ground, which parted under the blade like a piece of soap. Lucy's lips were a little open as she watched.

"You are a strong 'un, Fred."

He rested his weight on the spade and looked at her.

"Yes, I suppose I'm a hefty fellow."

"What's old Wedderburn been at you for again, Fred?"

"How do you know as he has?"

"Ben were in the kitchen talking last night."

"Ben were, were he. That chap be getting quite chatty in his old age."

"Why did old Wedderburn get ratty?"

"Oh, nothing more'n usual. He's just a darned contrary cuss."

Then he turned back to his digging. The afternoon was very quiet. Once in a while the mooing of a cow in a distant pasture broke out against the silence. In its continuity, the song of a lark high up, poured on and on unnoticed.

"Bessie's calved, Fred; it be a little beauty."

"Ah."

"Maria's had her kittens; she's hid 'em in my room, Fred. I did ought to tell missus, but I haven't the 'eart."

"Aye."

"It be a good sort of day, Fred."

"It be."

The lark stopped singing suddenly, and Lucy thought:

"That were a lovely spill of song."

When Fred had finished the ditch he came over to Lucy. He sat down by her side.

"Put your coat on," she said.

"It's so hot."

"You be all sweaty. Put it on, Fred, may be you'll get a chill."

He shook his head and lay on his back staring up

at the sky. Lucy looked round. His coat was lying in the grass next to his can of tea. She got up and fetched it. She came back, and leaning down put it over him. His gaze slid away from the sky to her face as she did so, then he put his arms quickly round her as she stooped over him. He pulled her down upon him so that his face was covered by her body. She struggled.

"Let me be, Fred, you be squeezing me to bits. Fred, leave off kissing me that way, Fred."

She thought confusedly:

"He be full of hotness to-day. I must be careful and still so's he'll think I'm angry."

"Luce."

"Leave me be, Fred."

"Kiss me."

"Not till you leave me be and sit up sensible," she panted.

He let her go abruptly. The half-shamed and half-angry expression on his face melted her. But she moved away from him. He turned over for a while, silent. By and by he said:

"I want you bad, Luce."

"I want you too, Fred, you know that, but I've got to keep good."

"I wish we were married, Luce. I'm a hearty

flesh and blood fellow what needs a woman. I loves you, Luce."

"I know. It is hard on you, Fred, and you're a good chap to me."

"When are we going to be able to get married? It looks as far off as ever. It makes me get kind of mad sometimes. What chance have I of getting more than the thirty shillings a week old Wedderburn pays, and no cottage to be had anywhere."

"We be treated bad, Fred, but we must have patience."

"To hell with patience. Treated bad, be we? treated worse'n animals. Animals be allowed to have their mates, but not you and me. If us did have each other, you'd be called a bad girl and me a skunk. Dang it. I don't know. May be it wouldn't be worse if we was."

Lucy did not know how to manage him in this mood.

"Don't take on, Fred, it'll come right somehow. We see each other, anyway."

"Don't know as that's a good thing."

"Oh, Fred!"

"Well, it's a restless business seeing the girl you love and not come close as you want."

Again there was a silence for a while, until he asked:

"What would you like to do, Luce, this evening?"

"I'd like to take a walk. Earl's Wood be lovely now and it'll be cool."

"All right. I must go back to the farm and feed the heifers. Then get a wash and I'll be ready. What shall you do till then?"

"Come along with you, Fred, and may be step in and have a chat with Mrs. Page. She do be seedy these days and loves a talk."

By-and-by they began to walk back by the footpath. The fields stretched away, still pale from the recent mowing. Only along each side was a belt of high uncut grass. Fred walked in front carrying the spade over his shoulder, his tea can swinging by its handle in his other hand. Lucy walking behind thought:

"I wish you weren't unhappy, Fred."

The hunch of his shoulders told her that he was. The sun beat down strongly on their backs. By-and-by they came beneath a row of tall elms. The cool shadows flickered like water over them as they passed.

They came to a gate which led into the main road.

The road was white. A car raced by, throwing up a cloud of dust. Lucy shut her eyes and put her hands over her face. She could feel the grit between her teeth. When she looked again she could see the edge of the dust-cloud floating away over the hedge.

"It do seem a shame," she thought. "The dog roses must be clogged with it."

She noticed that the green of the leaves was dimmed with a layer of thin gray powder upon them. They passed the Blue Boar Inn, with its two squares of grass railed round by a chain between white posts. The ducks from the pond opposite were waddling about upon it. They kept up an incessant undertone of "quack, quack," lazily, as if the heat had taken away their energy.

Lucy and Fred walked on stolidly through the High Street. The walls of the houses were warm and glowing from the sun that was slipping quietly nearer the earth's eager fingers. Presently the spaces between the houses grew longer. The man and girl turned down a fugitive green lane which suddenly appeared.

"I'll pop in here, Fred. Will you come for me when you're ready, dear?" Lucy said.

"Yes. I won't be above 'alf an hour or so."
"All right."

He walked on. Lucy watched him for a few minutes so that she would be ready to wave to him if he turned. But he did not look back. His shadow stretched long and thin behind him as he trudged on, silhouetted against the golden glow in the sky. She sighed as she went up the path to the cottage. The door was wide open. In the gloom of the stuffy little room an old woman sat in an arm-chair. The chair was by the window, which was half obscured by pots of pink geraniums. A bird cage hung from a nail in the ceiling above the window. Inside, a linnet hopped backwards and forwards perpetually.

"Why, if it isn't young Lucy," the old woman said after peering at her. "With the light at the back of you it's hard to see who it is."

"How be you, Mrs. Page?"

"As well as can be expected, the doctor told me to-day. I allus thinks as I'll be worse afore I'm better."

"Be the pain awful bad, Mrs. Page?"

"Not all the time. But it gets me now and then so as I don't know how to stop from giving a scream, but to the 'ospital I'll not go, not if twenty doctors were to tell me as I ought. Here I've lived and here I'll die. Lucy, I wonder what the pain is, as pulls

me to bits like as if 'orses were tearing me to pieces."
"I don't know. Don't the doctor say anything,
Mrs. Page?"

"He don't say nothing 'cept as he'd like me to go to 'ospital, and be what he calls rayed or summat."

"Well, I don't know," Lucy began, then stopped, for she thought:

"If what missus thinks is true, it won't be no good her going to 'ospital, for there ain't no cure for cancer, they do say."

So she said instead: "Your bird ain't singing to-day, Mrs. Page."

"No, Tim be tired of this 'ot room, I 'spect. Could you put the cage outside the window for a spell, Lucy? It'll do him good."

So Lucy took the cage down and went with it outside. She hung it on a nail where the tendrils from the jasmine curled round it eagerly. She hated to see how the linnet was panting, its feathered breast terribly shaken by its breaths. However, it began to sing almost at once, rich flute-like notes, that floated towards the tranquil sky.

"Would you like a cup of tea, Lucy?" Mrs. Page asked when she went back into the room.

"That I would, if you'll let me get it for myself, Mrs. Page. Will you have one, too?" "Yes, I could do with a cup of tea."

Co Lucy fetched the white cups and saucers, with the blue figures upon them, from the dresser and put the brown teapot on the hob to warm.

"Tea were meant to be a good rich color, or it wouldn't be black afore it gets into the pot. And you can't get that color without you put enough of it in. The milk be out in the shed. 'Tis the only place as it'll keep fresh these hot days."

Lucy went out through the back door to the stone-flagged yard, where the fence hung drunkenly, weighted down by the tangled mass of rambler roses and clematis that ran over it. The yard was filled with the sound of droning bees. Occasionally a higher note broke the lazy rhythm as a bluebottle flew by, buzzing. The shed smelt of earth and mildew. It was always twilight there, because the small window pane was thickly covered with cobwebs. The milk on the stone slab in the corner was as cool as morning.

Lucy told Mrs. Page the latest news she knew about the village, though it was not very much. After tea Fred called for her. He was wearing a neat blue suit. The seams on his shoulders were a little strained. He had broadened out since it was bought. His gray cap was set on his head at the angle decreed correct in Little Elmbury.

"How be you keeping, Mrs. Page?" he asked.

"I be rather poorly just now. The heat be trying."

"Aye."

His gaze, which had been tranquil, grew troubled as he felt ashamed of the thought that came to him, "If she were to die, me and Lucy might get this cottage."

"Ready, Lucy?" he asked.

"Yes, Fred."

"Be there anything I can do for you, Mrs. Page?" she asked.

"No, thanks. Martha'll be along in 'alf an hour. But look in again when you're passing. Time do go slow when you can't do nothing but sit 'ere and think."

Lucy and Fred walked through the village towards Earl's Wood. On the way they passed motor cars and carts coming back from Ware. Now and then they met a few sheep or cows plodding along in charge of a man or a bare-legged boy—always with them there was some sort of a dog helping to round up the animals. The sun had disappeared. The sky in the west was still and washed with gold. A slip of a moon rose above the entangling screen of branches over Earl's Wood. It drew the night clouds softly across the quiet fields till the colors were soaked up and the outlines faded away.

Lucy and Fred walked on in silence. Quite often when they were together they did not speak. Each rested in the other's quiescence.

Lucy thought:

"He still be sad."

Fred thought:

"The cow shed'll need the roof mended before the winter."

Presently they left the road and walked across the footpath to the wood. He slipped his hand into hers. She felt the pulses hammering in his fingers. The poppies in the field were gray by the faint light. Their heads drooped as they stood dreaming among the corn stalks. It was warm. The earth held the heat of the sun still. Even the path on which they walked seemed throbbing with life.

"Shall we go through the wood, Lucy?"

"Yes."

So they left the path and stepped across the wide dry ditch that encircled it.

"My, it is dark. You can almost touch the blackness with your hand," Lucy said.

She went nearer to Fred instinctively. He put his arm round her waist and drew her closer. They moved along like that with their sides pressed against each other. The contact sent Fred's blood racing. Once they stopped and kissed desperately. Presently they came to a clearing. The moonlight touched the boles of the trees. It glittered on the drifts of last year's beech leaves. The night hung silver and black and perilously tender about them. Fred said shortly:

"Let's sit down," and pulled her with him into a hollow. The leaves yielded beneath them. Fred began to caress her with his hands and lips. Byand-by she pushed him away, and they lay still. But it was only a respite and Lucy knew it. So quiet were they, that a young rabbit came close to them, before it discovered their presence. Fred moved suddenly and the rabbit crouched down by a patch of foxgloves at the foot of the tree beneath where they were. Its ears lay close back in terror. Its legs were bent ready for flight, but the knowledge of the nearness of human beings kept it panting where it was. By-and-by it heard the murmuring of two voices. The man's was husky and the girl's thick and tremulous. The leaves rustled. The trunks of the trees rose slim and clear towards the sky. The

man's voice changed to pleading. His words came brokenly. Once the girl whispered, "Oh, no! Don't! Oh, don't!" Later on the rabbit heard a sound that was half a laugh and half a sob from the girl, and a strange heavy breathing from the man. The rabbit trembled. After that, silence settled down upon the wood. The night breeze stirred the heavy leaves. The rabbit waited. Its ears lay back, its nostrils quivered. A faint rustle was the only sound it made when at last it dared to leave the place. A million golden eyes stared down from the sky unheeded.

CHAPTER III

THE whirr of the alarm clock shattered the silence. Lucy started up. The light of the September morning fell upon her face. There was a luminous quality in the texture of her skin. Her eyes looked tired, but not sleepy. She stared at the sky and thought:

"What's wrong?" and then remembering, "It's true. I'll have to tell Fred, I can't bear it any longer by myself."

She did not cry, but her face crinkled up. She looked like a child before its tears fall, when it has hurt itself. She got up and dressed. She thought in terror:

"I'm sure missus has noticed. She looked at me queer yesterday when I was hanging up them curtains."

Lucy went on her knees by the bed and prayed desperately.

"Oh, God, take it away! Oh, Lord, do you understand how awful it is for a girl like me to have a baby? Help me, help me. What should I do with a little child? You understand what they'll say about me, don't you? Lord, I suppose it were a wrong I did, but it was 'cos I was weak. Oh, forgive me and Fred, and if you can't answer this

prayer, then please send me strength to bear my lot, for I be full of fear. Thy will be done. Amen."

She rose then; quickly, because she was late. She felt better. She rarely prayed, partly because in the morning she had to hurry down, and at night she was always half asleep by the time she got to bed. Now in her extremity she prayed for help to a Being whom she had been told existed, but the need for whom, until now, she had never really felt. She was timid in her supplication for she believed she had sinned. Yet because her mind had formed the picture of the Christ who understood the weakness of human beings and was pitiful, she felt that she could turn to Him for comfort.

When the breakfast was set, Mrs. Leekey came down.

"How's the toothache, Lucy?" she asked.

The girl bent quickly to pick up a half-burnt piece of wood that had fallen out of the fire. Her face blushed deeply. She thought:

"Now I've got to lie again. I wish I 'ad got toothache. I wonder if she's 'eard that I went to the doctor and not to Mr. Dawkins?"

She rose and moved over to the dresser.

"It be better, thank you, Mum."

"Did the dentist take it out?"

"No, Mum."

"What was wrong with it?"

"I don't know, Mum. May be it was just a cold in it like."

"Didn't he give you anything for it?"

"Yes, Mum, a bottle of 'ot stuff to rub on the gum."

Mrs. Leekey was puzzled. In some way Lucy had changed. She did not know exactly how. She thought:

"What's wrong with her? Not that she was ever one to talk much. But now she goes about all day as if she's looking at something I can't see; it's uncanny. I hope she's not going to get religious or something. She does her work as well as ever, that I will say. It can't be Fred. They still see each other just as always. I don't know."

Lucy thought:

"She be thinking about me. What will she do if she knows? Well, I'll tell Fred sometime to-day. Poor boy. He'll be upset like. But he's got to know."

The day finished at last. Lucy put on her hat and coat and started to walk to the place where she was to meet Fred. Don went with her. His tail began wagging, he carried it like a pennant. He kept running from one side of the lane to the other. As he leapt down in the ditch, smelling for the scent of rabbits, Lucy could hear the soft swish the grasses made as he pushed his way through them. When he came back to her panting, she stroked him. His fur was wet with dew.

She met Fred at the stile by the field. It was at a little-used foot path between two meadows. When he saw her he jumped down from the stile where he had been sitting and came running to meet her. She could see by his face that he was happy. She kept back the words that she had prepared so carefully in her mind. She thought:

"I can't, not yet. I'll stop his happiness. I can't do it yet."

"Luce," Fred said, "there be dozens and dozens of mushrooms there in the corner. Shall we pick 'em?"

"We've got nothing to put 'em in."

"We'll manage. We'll put 'em in our handkerchiefs. If we pick enough we'll take 'em along and get Mrs. Mattison to cook 'em for us for supper. Won't that be grand? Ben will be there and we'll be a merry party."

She forced herself to sound gay.

"Aye, that would be good."

He kissed her lightly, then walked with quick steps towards the stile. The field looked silvery and their feet made a faint hissing noise as they moved. A flock of birds flew over their heads. Silence settled closely down. They picked the mushrooms for some time. Lucy liked the feel of the cool smooth stems between her fingers. They moved in zig-zagging circles, their faces bent earthwards. Every now and then one of them stooped down and pulled up a mushroom that came away with a faint sucking sound. The rooks gradually ceased circling and cawing above the elm trees at the end of the pasture. Now and then the two called to each other:

"Oh, Luce, I've found a big 'un! How be you getting on?"

"I've got about as much as I can manage, Fred."
She took off her hat, and put the overflowing handkerchief into it.

"There's a chill in the air, Luce. Shall we be going along?"

"Yes."

So they left the field, and the trail of their foot steps showed dark upon the silver grass.

"Be your feet damp, Luce?" he asked once, but she only shook her head.

By the time they reached the house where Fred

and Ben lodged, Lucy was tired and cold. Fred sensed her unhappiness. He had realized that something was wrong with her for some weeks. He thought:

"I wonder what's up. She'll tell me if she wants to," and left it at that.

Fred went into the kitchen to ask his landlady if she would cook the mushrooms for supper. Lucy opened the door of the living-room. Ben was sitting by the lamp reading. The parlor was small with a low ceiling. Mrs. Mattison was a childless widow and the walls were covered with photographs of her dead husband, and groups of nephews and nieces with their parents. The paper was a honeycolored brown. Over the fireplace was an overmantel with a crochet wool runner. It covered the whole mantelpiece and fell over the edge in a fringe. A very old harmonium stood in one corner. The table in the center of the room was mahogany. The ottoman, with the horsehair stuffing bulging out in places from its sagging seat, stood by the window. The chairs varied because, as the original set had come to grief through long service, replacements had been made with oddments picked up at local sales. There were any number of ornaments about the room. Ben sat in a high-backed Windsor chair. The light

from the lamp outlined his face as he turned towards the door at Lucy's entrance. The terror which had been rising in her mind all the way back with Fred, suddenly came to a climax. She took a step towards him. Then she put her hands before her eyes and began to sob. Ben put down his paper and got up. He came over to her. His hands hung down by his sides loosely and he gazed down at her very gently with a look of understanding. Then his sensitive mouth drooped with tenderness.

"Be I of any use to you, Lucy, dear?" he asked. She shook her head and the tears splashed down between her fingers.

"Fred's got my handkerchief, Ben; lend me yourn."

He found one in his pocket and handed it to her. "Do Fred know what your trouble is, Lucy? Does any one know what your trouble is?"

"No."

Then she looked him straight in the eyes.

"You said one night as how nature would be too strong for me and Fred. That's what's wrong."

She saw him nod his head.

"Be you sure, Lucy?"

"Aye, I be sure."

"Shall I send Fred to you?"

She nodded. Then he said in a low voice:

"Don't 'ee worry, girl. You think as how you're wicked, but you ain't the first woman who's conceived a child out of wedlock, and you won't be the last. Don't grieve."

Then he left the room. Lucy could hear Fred's laugh and Mrs. Mattison's voice, before the door closed behind him. She glanced round and sat down on the sofa. Nervously her fingers plucked at a patch of the protruding horsehair stuffing. Don had followed her into the room and now he lay down on the hearth with a thud. He gave a long contented sigh. His nose rested on his paws, his eyes regarded her unblinkingly. She wondered what the dog was thinking about, if he did at all. She tried to keep her mind away from her own problem. Presently Fred came in. She saw at once that he knew. For some reason he tiptoed across the room as if he was in the presence of sickness. He came over to her and stood looking down.

He began in a whisper.

"What's this Ben's been telling me? Oh, Lucy—"

Then he dropped on his knees beside her and

buried his face against her breast. She put her arms around him and stroked his hair. His sensations were strange and terrifying. He thought:

"My poor little Luce. How bad she must be feeling. I didn't ought to have touched her that night. She was right not to want it—she knew better than me."

He said from her arms and his voice was muffled: "It's ours, Luce dear, dear Luce. After all it's ours. We'll get married as soon as we can and then it'll be all right."

She did not speak, but he felt her tremble violently.

"Do 'ee feel all right, girl? You ain't feeling no pain?"

"No."

"You forgive me for what I done?"

"There ain't nothing to forgive, Fred."

"When did you know, Luce?"

"I was afeared in July and then again in August, and so at last when I couldn't abide the 'orror of thinking about it no more, I went into Ware and saw that new doctor. He said there weren't no doubt."

"It were brave of you to go alone. You ought to have told me and I'd have gone with you." She laid her lips against his rough hair.

"I were ashamed, Fred, dear. In case it weren't true after all."

"You don't need to be ashamed, it were me," he said.

Later on they discussed the question of marriage. Then some one knocked at the door. Fred got up and went over to open it. Ben said:

"Mrs. Mattison do be wanting us to have supper." Fred realized suddenly that he was very hungry. "I'll come and help lay the table," Lucy said.

"No, that you won't. I'll do it," Fred answered.

But she insisted, and presently the three of them were eating.

Afterwards they sat round the fire. The two men smoked their pipes and Lucy stared into the flames. At last Fred knocked out his pipe and said:

"Ben, Lucy and I be going to get spliced just as soon as ever parson'll do it."

"That be fine."

"Oh, Fred, I wish we could go right away from here to do it."

"Why?"

She found it hard to explain. She could not bear the thought of the villagers sniggering, because she had had to get married in a hurry. She thought: "He'll think I'm crazed, for sure. But oh! it will be awful—me with no name or anything."

Ben came to her aid.

"She be right, Fred. It'll be hard for her to have the girls pulling sly looks at her. And you know they will."

"It isn't as if I'd got a name of my own, Fred. It'll be a shame to me—"

"You'll have my name then for all time, Luce. Mrs. Fred Baines, that's who you'll be," but when she only sighed he put out his hand and covered hers as it lay in her lap.

"If I had any money we'd go to London. I've an idea I could run a greengrocer's shop if I'd the money. I'm sick of this life here. A man may slave for ever and nothing belongs to him."

"If you wants to go to London, Fred, you shall," Ben said slowly. "I've fifty pound what they gave me as a war gratuity and you can borrow it."

"No," Lucy said.

"Why not? I've no use at all for it. It be eating its head off in the Post Office Savings Bank. Now, girl, don't you be foolish. I'm a-going to-morrow to get a form and have it out. It'll be just atween Fred and me and he pays it back when he can."

"I reckon we can't refuse a real kindness like that, Luce. It'll help us a lot."

"It seems a shame to take Ben's money 'cos there's no telling when we can pay it back," she said.

"Never you worry about that," Ben replied.

"Well, it's no good trying to say thank you, Ben, dear. But you'll never know how grateful we be," she said.

"You've said it, Luce, he'll never know."

"What's the time, Fred?"

"It's nigh upon ten."

"Then I must be getting back to the farm."

"I'll see you home, Luce."

She got up and put on her hat and coat, then came back to the chair where Ben was sitting. She looked at him without speaking for a moment. She said at last:

"You be a good man, Ben, bless you."

He shook his head, dumbly denying her statement. Then patted the dog's head, which was resting upon his knee. Lucy and Fred went to the door and Don left Ben and followed sedately.

"Good night, Ben."

"Good night, Lucy."

When they reached the tree-shadowed darkness of the lane to the Hill Farm, Fred took her hand.

Lucy felt that she loved him more than ever before. He had responded at once to her need. More than that. She remembered his almost triumphant words about the baby that was coming belonging to both of them.

"I were right, he do really love me," she thought. When they got to the farm Fred put his arms round her shoulders. He buried his face against her neck. They were not an articulate couple. Endearments came only with difficulty to their lips. Fred's moment of expression had come and gone when he had comforted Lucy earlier that night. Now he spoke of the practical details of the move to London. Already his mind was thinking and adjusting itself to the future.

"Luce, my cousin Bill lives in London, off Theobald's Road. I been there during the war. I'll write and ask him what we'd best do."

Lucy was prepared to leave everything to him. "All right, Fred. Let's go quick."

"How about your notice to Mrs. Leekey?"

"I'll tell 'er to-morrow I must leave any time after next week, Fred. She's a good sort. I don't reckon her'll make no bother."

They rested there quietly in the shadows by the farm fence. The leaves on the fruit trees rustled

crisply. Presently Lucy heard some one in the house locking the windows. She drew herself away from Fred.

"I must go." He kissed her mouth.

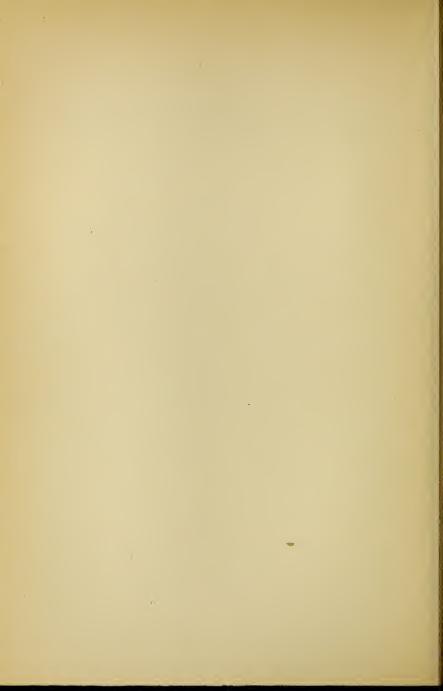
"Well, good night, Luce. Sleep happy."

"Good night, dear, dear Fred."

She came back to him again and taking his face between her hands stared for a moment into his eyes, which in the darkness gleamed strangely.

"I'll be a good wife to you, Fred," she whispered solemnly. She ran up the pathway to the door. Fred turned and walked away quickly. She watched him from the porch. A faint mist rose waist high from the ground. The trees seemed to be floating above the earth. A big golden horned moon shone down upon the quiet scene. There was a faint smell of ripening fruit and moist earth. A friendly familiar scent. Lucy sighed, she would miss this place. She wondered what living in London would be like. And with Fred. She felt very happy and safe.

Don moved restlessly. She turned around and, opening the door, went into the house.



PART TWO



CHAPTER IV

The room was big, with a large window. Yet the houses on the opposite side of the street were so near that it was necessary to have a light always burning. A double bed stood on one side of the room next the wall. By it there was a battered cot. The bed had no sheets on it and the blankets were threadbare with age and constant washing. The deal table in the middle of the room was as white as the bones of a skeleton from endless scrubbing. In the kitchen range a small fire was burning. Faded blue curtains hung at the windows. A yellow London fog pressed against the window pane.

Benjamin Frederick Baines was sitting on the rag rug in front of the fire. His skin had that fine pallor that comes from lack of sun. A mouse scuttled behind the wainscotting. Benny said:

"Hist!" the scuttling ceased.

Steps sounded upon the stairs. He jumped up eagerly and ran to the door. Lucy came in. By the hand she led a child of about three. Five years had altered her a lot and quickened her speech. There were lines on her face which come with the incessant worry of trying to make both ends meet. She was

carrying a big shopping bag that bulged. She smiled when she saw Benny.

"Here, son, take these flowers. Me arm's cramped."

He took a small bunch of marigolds and held them up delightedly. He loved flowers.

"Pretty yellow, Mum," he said.

Lucy dropped the bag on the table and sat down heavily on a chair. She was again pregnant, and the stairs were steep. Robert, still the baby, stumbled across to Benny and tried to pull the marigolds from his hands.

"No," said Benny, and put them on the table out of his reach.

"Dad been in?" Lucy asked.

"No." He watched her as she took off her hat and coat and hung them on the hook behind the door. As she moved round laboriously he trotted after her, chattering.

"Mum, it's Guy Fawkes to-day."

"Don't I know it, Benny?"

"Mum, may I watch the bonfire? There's going to be a big 'un in Queen's Square."

"I don't like you being out after dark, son."

"But, Mum, I'll be with Albert and Mab. I want to see the bonfire."

"Well, we'll think about it after tea."

"Want to see the bonfire," Robert said immediately. Lucy laughed.

"Well, that you won't, lovey."

She thought:

"I must put a penny in the slot, or that gas'll give out—Wonder if Fred's had luck to-day—This fog's bad for trade. Who's going to buy fruit when it's too dark to see the barrow? I can't get used to fog, not after all this time, I can't—Those curtains want washing again—Soap do seem dear—I don't know how it is, but it's always a case of choosing atween being dirty or being hungry. But there, I'm lucky to have Fred such a dear; why he don't hardly ever go to a pub—It must be a week since I were at the clinic. I must go again to-morrow."

Benny and Robert were playing a game in which Robert was a guy and Benny the boy who went around with it in the streets. He kept shouting "Spare a copper for the poor old guy."

Lucy joined in when they came up to her; she pretended to search in an imaginary purse and find a coin to give them.

By-and-by Fred opened the door. He had changed in looks less than his wife, but he had absorbed the speech and ways of the Londoner more

thoroughly than Lucy. He swung Robert up over his head until the child shouted with delight.

"Me too, Daddy," Benny begged.

"You, you great boy. I couldn't lift you up if I tried," but in the end he put Robert down and gave Benny a turn.

Lucy knew that he must have had a good day, and felt happy.

"What's for tea, Luce? I'm famished."

"There's a bit of sausage."

"Ah, that's good. Had some luck to-day."

"What?"

"Well, you know that old lady I told you about what lives Marchmont Street. She said that last lot of apples I sold her were so good she'd take all I'd with me to-day. Eight bob's worth at one go. What about that?"

"And on a day like this, too, Fred."

"Yes."

Presently the kettle began to sing and the fryingpan gave out a pleasant smell of cooking sausage.

Benny sniffed.

"Oo, Mum," he said.

"Not for you, son. You've had your share to-day already, but you shall have a piece of bread soaked in the fat."

"Me too," Robert said.

"Well, we'll see."

After the meal Fred helped to clear the table. It had struck him that Lucy looked horribly tired. He loved her in a steady way.

"I do wish the new baby wasn't coming. God knows it's hard enough as it is," he thought.

Lucy looked across at him.

"A penny for them, Fred?"

"Oh, nothing much, Lucy, except as that you do look tired."

"Well, it's to be expected. My time's getting near."

"Yes, suppose so."

By-and-by Benny said:

"Mum, may I go out now?"

She hesitated. She disliked letting the little boy run about the streets, because she was afraid of the traffic. But she knew he had set his heart upon it and he had so little pleasure. Besides, the streets were the children's only playground, so she said:

"All right, son. But don't be later than half-past six, because you'll worry mummy."

He was a singularly thoughtful child, and she knew he would come back at the time she told him.

"Where's he going, Luce?" Fred said.

"To see the bonfire in Queen's Square. With young Albert and Mab from next door."

"Might go along with him, perhaps."

"If you aren't too tired I wish you could look at some of them mouse holes. The one you filled in the cupboard's all nibbled round again. It's big enough to let a rat through, let alone a mouse."

"All right, Luce. I'll bet these walls are a sight behind the paneling. All ought to come down, every bit of it."

Benny slipped out of the door during the talk. He was excited by the sound of fireworks banging off in the road. He thought:

"Teacher says Guy Fawkes was a wicked man. If he was it's funny he made fireworks come. I love fireworks."

He walked down the stairs carefully. They were worn, and in some places broken. Before now he had tripped up and crashed down them. So he was careful. When he reached the bottom he opened the heavy Georgian front door with difficulty and went out into the foggy night. It was clearer than it had been. All along the street there were little groups of children. Some were letting off squibs which banged and bounced about. Some were putting colored matches to small heaps of paper and wood that they

had collected in the gutter. A vivid red or green light would splutter in the darkness. For a moment eager white faces, with deep shadows hollowed out for eyes and mouths, could be seen in the sudden light. Then the paper would catch fire, and amidst yells and screeches the ruddy flames painted immature laughing features against the darkness till the light died down, whilst grubby hands eagerly rebuilt the heap, ready for another match.

Benny went to the house that was next to his home and pushed open the door. It was rarely closed. The hall was in a far worse state of disrepair than at No. 17. The paneling on the walls had long ago been stripped off. The ceiling was covered with patches of damp. The whole building was visibly falling to bits with decay. Benny went to the door on the right-hand side of the hall and banged with his fist. It opened and two children of about nine and twelve came out.

"'Ello, Benny," Mab said. She was a skinny little thing, with an old wizened face.

"You coming to the bonfire?" he asked.

"Yes, we're coming now."

The three of them ran down Bawling Street towards the square. Incredible numbers of children were already congregated there. Benny ran along between the brother and sister. To him they seemed quite grown up. They were "big children."

"Now look 'ere, young Ben, you're to keep close to me, d'you 'ear? Some of them fellows are rough and you might get 'urt."

"All right, Mab."

The pandemonium increased as they drew near. Scores of children of every age and size shouted and screamed. A big bonfire had just been lit in the wide space outside the technical school. From the midst of groups of children an occasional rocket soared upwards with a hiss. Black imps leaped around whirling sticks of golden rain, then just before the flames reached the end of the cardboard tubes which they held in their hands, they would throw them high into the air, so that a stream of golden fire trailed downwards.

Ben stood between Mab and Albert, his lips parted. His eyes moved from group to group.

He felt dazed in the maze of colored flames around him. Now and then girls ran past screaming, chased by youths with lighted crackers. By-and-by, as the blaze from the bonfire grew fiercer, the horseplay grew rougher. Albert moved forward to get nearer the center of the crowd. Benny followed with Mab. A gang of about ten big boys bore down upon the group shouting:

"Let's ginger up their bloody bonfire."

In the rush that followed Benny got separated from the other two children and pushed near the fire. He shrank back from the intense heat, but he was wedged in by the others. He looked round anxiously to find Mab and Albert. They had, however, been swept away from him. With the stupidity that comes from an entire lack of imagination, one of the youths flung a handful of rockets into the center of the flames. For the fraction of a moment Benny saw the leaping pile of fire before him. He saw the railings round the square standing out in black relief. He saw the excited, half-frightened faces of the onlooking children. Then, as the rockets exploded with a deafening bang, Benny's shrill scream rose high above the noise.

"Gawd, wot 'ave you done?" a young man shouted as he dashed over to where the child had fallen. He bent over him and then his face went rather pale. He picked Benny up in his arms. He began to run towards the children's hospital in Great Ormond Street. In the hush that followed, the clatter of footsteps could be heard coming from the alleys that lead out of Bawling Street.

Women, their aprons tied round their high stomachs, and men in their shirt-sleeves, ran towards the square. In the distance the rattling of the trams

in Theobald's Road as they jangled over the points were loudly audible.

"Wot's 'appened?"

"What's up?"

"Who's that young Mortimer's got?"

"Where's 'e going?"

"Oh, it's some little 'un."

"A rocket got his face."

"Who is it?"

"'Is head hung all loose like over the young chap's arm what carried 'im."

"Oh, these here fireworks didn't ought to be allowed."

"Why don't the police stop it?"

"What's 'appened?"

"Who's hurt?"

Mab and Albert had been looking wildly for Benny. Suddenly one of the children saw them and cried:

"Weren't you with young Benny Baines?"

"Yes. Where is he?"

"Well, it's him as is 'urt."

"It was that big rocket Jim Taylor chucked on the fire. I saw 'im. It exploded bang in the little 'un's face."

The crowd drifted to the emergency entrance of

the hospital. By-and-by young Mortimer came out. He was sniffing, as he rubbed his sleeve across his face.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nuffing, 'cept they think in there as both 'is eyes is blowed out."

A woman screamed. A sickeningly piercing scream. It was Lucy.

They carried her back to her home and up the stairs.

The crowd drifted from the hospital to stand around the door of No. 17. Fred stood dazed. He was like an animal that has been hit on the head. Robert was not crying, but whimpered now and then.

Lucy was lying on the bed. Her eyes were wide open. Now and then she moaned.

The ambulance had been sent for to take her to hospital. The shock had brought on her labor prematurely.

Outside the crowd gossiped. Men and women went into the Red George to have one. They came out quickly because they wished to see the end of the drama. The accident had finished the firework celebrations for the night. Passers-by stopped on the outskirts of the crowd and heard the details of

what had occurred. All the people there who already knew it by heart, listened with fresh interest each time it was repeated.

"Hullo, what's up?"

"Ain't you heard?"

"A little 'un's had his eyes blowed out."

"Wot, not one of Mrs. Baines's kids?"

"Yes. Her Benny."

"Yes, and now she's in labor. The shock's brought it on."

"No."

"Yes. The ambulance ought to be 'ere any moment now."

When at last the clanging bell announced its arrival, a thrill of expectancy ran through the onlookers.

From the windows on either side of No. 17 heads craned.

The ambulance stopped and two attendants jumped smartly down. A nurse followed more sedately. They took out a stretcher. Robert began to cry again. A woman picked him up and told him to stop and not be a great baby. The attendants came into the room. The nurse was gentle and efficient.

Lucy was wrapped up in a blanket and placed

upon the stretcher. She made a last effort to speak coherently to Fred:

"You stay 'ere and look after Robert."

She panted.

"I'll be all right. Come and tell me what's happened as soon as you can."

Fred nodded and kissed her.

The attendants picked the stretcher up between them and went carefully out of the room, followed by the nurse and by Fred, carrying Robert.

When they got downstairs the crowd parted, craning their necks to see Lucy. A tiny child got in the way. Its mother shot out a heavy hand to drag it back.

"'Ere you," she shouted, "I'll give you such a wallop if you don't keep still, you see if I don't."

The men slid the stretcher with Lucy upon it into the ambulance. The nurse got inside, one of the attendants started the engine of the motor, the other climbed into the driver's seat. Then the bell clanged to clear a passage through the crowd and the vehicle drove away rapidly.

"Oh, don't she look ill, poor thing."

Several women had begun to weep, and now they wiped their eyes and noses on their aprons.

Fred remained staring after the motor had driven

away. Then he went back into the house, still carrying Robert, and closed the door.

He went up to their room.

"You ought to be asleep, son," he said. So he undressed the little boy and put him into his cot. Then he went and sat by the fire, which was nearly out. He sat that way gazing into the glow, without moving, for a long time. The hammer and nails and bits of tin he had been using to mend the mouse holes lay on the floor where he had flung them, before going out to see what all the commotion in the street was about. He thought:

"Why didn't I go with him? He was so little. That's what Luce'll think too. Oh, God."

The crowd outside had dispersed. The Red George was full. Several of those who had been a part of it would have had one over the eight before closing time. Sympathy takes them that way in Bawling Street.

Presently Fred went to ask a neighbor to step in and keep an eye on Robert. He had to go along to the hospital and find out if there was any fresh news of Benny.

CHAPTER V

THE new baby was christened Sampson, and it was six months old before Benny came back. After he was discharged from the hospital, he was sent away to a convalescent home in the country. Apart from the fact that the sight of both his eyes had been destroyed, his system had received a shock the effects of which would take years to pass.

The material fortunes of the Baines had changed during that time. A woman of wealth had seen the tragedy reported in the press at the time it occurred. She had written to Fred and then seen him. Finally, she had told him she would like to give him some help, and asked him what form it should take. Fred went to Lucy in hospital. The good fortune had a bitter taste, because of its cause. Lucy suggested that he should ask to be set up in a shop.

"There's Mr. Crosbie in Bollard Street. You know, Fred, he'd love to be rid of his store. I believe we might make something of it."

"It's grocery, Luce. My line's always been fruits and veg."

"I know, Fred. But with a general store it ain't so hard. You wouldn't have to get up at four every morning as you do with the fruit. Besides, folks

have got to have tea and sugar and flour whatever happens, and they can do without the things in your trade, 'cept for potatoes."

"Yes, there's a lot in that."

"Besides, Bollard Street's next to ours. It might be easier for Benny being in his own district."

"That's true."

"Fred."

"Yes."

"About Benny."

"Well."

"'Ave they said what 'e'll look like?"

"No."

"'Ave you asked?"

"No."

"I think you did ought to, Fred."

"All right."

He was sitting by her bed. Self-consciously, because of the other people in the ward, he put his hand on hers.

"We've got to get used to thinking what he'll look like if he's changed, Fred."

"Yes."

"You see, Fred, he isn't a baby and he was always that quick minded. He mustn't guess we're seeing him different if he is."

"No, Luce. Don't worry."

"I've thought about it here a lot. You see, Fred, there's Robert too. He may say something if we don't let him know—"

"Yes, Luce, don't you worry."

"Fred, if we can we must make Robert understand that he'll have to be our Benny's eyes."

It was time for visitors to go. Fred rose.

"Find out about it, Fred, and then bring Robert with you when you come next time."

"I will."

"Fred, I want to call baby Sampson."

"Seems a queer name to give a little nipper. It'll be 'ard on him when he gets bigger."

"We can call him Sammy, Fred."

"That's so. All right, call him what you wants. I'll go and see old Crosbie to-night, Luce, after I've thought it over a bit."

He bent down and kissed her gently. She was still weak. At any rate, Sampson would be the last child she would bear. Fred did not know how very nearly he had lost his wife at the baby's birth.

"Be sure and bring Robert when you come next Sunday, Fred."

"Right you are, Luce. He wants to see the new baby."

"Send me a line about Benny, Fred."

"All right."

When he had gone Lucy drew the bed clothes up as high as she could. She was still very weak. The tears poured down her face.

The ward sister found her like that when she walked by some moments later.

"Now then, Mrs. Baines, you mustn't cry," she said gently.

"I'm sorry, Sister."

The sister knew of the tragedy. Sometimes she wondered how it was possible to go on working and keep smiling. So many of the women who found their way into the hospital had heavy burdens to bear. So few seemed to have happy lives. Yet they were brave. "That was what kept you at it, perhaps," she thought.

"It's nearly time for your son's next feed," she said. "You won't be able to give him a proper meal if you cry like that." She was practical and yet so kind. "And then he'll have something to say."

Lucy stopped crying and smiled. The sister straightened the sheets and raised the sick woman's head to enable her to turn over the pillow. She said quite softly so that her voice was only just audible: "You're a brave woman. I do understand. Don't fret, my dear."

Lucy managed to smile.

"Thank you, Sister. That's lovely and comfortable now."

Presently the babies were wheeled in on trolleys. Each of the mites had labels on them to prevent them getting mixed. It wasn't really necessary, for by some magic each mother knew, unerringly, which of the tiny things belonged to her. For some moments the ward rang with the thin high wailing of hungry babies. Then, as each in turn was laid upon its mother's breast, its cries quieted.

The nurse gave Lucy the small bundle which was to be called Sampson. At once a wave of tenderness swept over her which drove the thought of Benny out of her mind. There were still marks upon Sampson's temples, where the instruments had bruised the flesh. The sister had told her they would soon disappear. The pull of his tiny lips at her breast comforted her. She let her fingers stray delicately across the ruddy down that covered his head. His tiny hand opened and shut upon her neck. The touch of his fingers was as balm to her unhappiness.

"He's the best-looking baby I've had yet, even if he is tiny. Bless his little heart," she thought.

When Fred got home he went to see old Crosbie. The grocery shop was a tiny place filled to the ceiling with goods. It was more like a general store in a village than a London shop. Crosbie was old. He had sons in the country and they offered him a home there. He was tired of work and trade was declining. He told Fred he could have the place cheaply.

"What living accommodation is there, Mr. Crosbie?" Fred asked.

"Come along and see." He left the small boy who helped him in charge and opened the door at the side of the counter. Goods from the shop seemed to overflow everywhere. Half-opened packing cases filled the passage. The living-room had biscuit tins and curtain rods and brush heads and pickle bottles in different corners. Some stairs led darkly from this room to the floor above, on which were two rooms.

"There's two more floors over these here, Mr. Baines," he explained, "but they're both let from the landlord and I don't have nothing to do with them. They're quiet folk and you never so much as hear

them. There's a sink on this floor, as well as one in the little room that leads off the parlor downstairs."

"It looks as if we might do a deal," Fred said. They arranged that he should go into the matter and let Mr. Crosbie know as soon as possible. Finally, after some weeks, the business was bought and the Baines moved in.

Winter passed and the spring gave place to June. Even Theobald's Road responded to the efforts of the sun. Men with their barrows piled high with bright fruits moved along the curbs, bringing a splash of color to the edges of the pavements. The side streets were filled with shouting children. Till nearly eleven o'clock they played between the grimy houses. The rooms were so small and stuffy they could not sleep.

It was at this time that Fred received a letter from the convalescent home at Seaford telling him that Benny was ready for discharge. He handed the sheet of paper to Lucy. As she read it her breath quickened.

"Oh, Fred, he's coming back. Benny's coming back."

Sampson began to cry from his soap-box cradle

in the corner and she hurried across to soothe him. Robert, when he was told, could hardly believe it was true.

"Is he really coming?" he asked twenty times an hour.

"When will he be here? Will it be now? Will it be soon?" He was wildly excited.

When Lucy put him to bed that night, she stood by him for a moment, thinking:

"I wonder if he'll understand. He's so small. I wonder if I can make him know."

"Robert, will you listen to what mummy's going to tell you and try and understand?"

"And try to understand," he repeated.

"Yes, son, try to understand."

"What's understand, Mummy?"

"It means knowing something, without me being there to tell you. Now listen carefully, Robert. When Benny comes home he won't be able to see anything at all. His eyes are gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes, he can't see any more. It'll always be dark like it is at night for him."

She thought:

"Can what I'm saying mean anything to him?"
She went on desperately:

"You'll have to look after him, Robert. You'll have to see he doesn't knock into things. He won't know where things are. You'll have to see them for him."

The little boy lay quite silent

"Will Benny cry?" he said at last.

"Not unless he hurts himself."

"He can't cry if his eyes are gone, Mum."

"He can feel like crying," she said, nearly breaking down herself at the thought.

"You'll have to look after him."

"And see he doesn't bump himself," Robert added. She thought:

"I believe he does understand." She bent down and kissed him quickly.

"Good night, son. Happy dreams."

So much depended on Robert, and he was only a baby. She felt helpless.

There was nothing to do but wait.

CHAPTER VI

The sunshine blazed down. It was three years since Benny had come home. Three years, during which time the family had grown into a design around him. That was, all except Sampson: he remained outside the family circle. He was a strange child. If you tried to play with him he cried. If you left him alone he resented it. Perhaps it was because he had been denied the love the youngest born usually has, for Benny had needed all the extra attention. He was intensely jealous. Looking at him playing on the shop step, Lucy sighed. He was so unlike Benny and Robert.

"He's a queer 'un. Wonder if it was anything to do with him coming early because of Benny's accident? Poor Sammy, he seems so out of it," she thought.

Benny and Robert were always together. The younger boy had very certainly acted as his brother's eyes. Right from the first moment of Benny's return he had taken upon himself the task of looking after him. Already he was the bigger of the two children, for Benny, who was delicate, grew slowly.

On Sundays when the shop was closed the two of them would sit upon the step and comment on life. With the extraordinary tenacity of memory that the blind possess, Benny could visualize the scene as he remembered it. Robert made up the picture for him by adding the details that time altered.

"Drunken Sal's waiting for a tram," he would say.

"Has she got a black eye?"

"Can't tell from 'ere, but she nearly always has. Her old green coat's gone at last. She's a black one on."

The growing store, if not exactly a success, gave Fred and his family a living. The goods were all methodically arranged so that you could put your hand on anything a customer asked for at once, which had not been the case in old Crosbie's time. One of the effects Benny had had was to make the whole family neat. If an article was moved from its usual place, it threw out his calculations. They tried to prevent him from being aware of his blindness, and this was one of the ways that helped most. He could go unerringly to the back of the counter and hand to his mother anything she asked for from a shelf within his reach. He loved doing this, and often she and Fred let him assist in serving. New customers who came to the shop did not know, unless they were told, that he couldn't see. They thought,

if the thought occurred to them at all, that he wore those thick black spectacles simply because his sight was bad. He moved readily enough about the familiar place. It was only if something unusual happened or when he was out in the street that he faltered. With the sense of memory went the sense of touch and smell and sound. He could tell which street he was in by the peculiar odor it held for him. By the sense of touch he seemed to know exactly what an object looked like. To these compensating qualities he added constant questionings, and whatever he was told his memory stored away immediately and for ever. It was no use trying to hide the truth from him, you gave yourself away at once. If you were pleased or sad or angry, Benny knew it, though just how it was impossible to ascertain.

When Robert went off to school in the morning he would, in fine weather, leave Benny sitting on the shop step. As he sat there, the life of the street spread itself before his eager mind. He would hear a footstep coming along the pavement and think "That's Mrs. Foyle. Her bunions must be hurting her to-day. Her foot's dragging so." He would listen to the trams and 'buses along Theobald's Road and the sound of different motor engines. "That's a Morris Cowley, that's an Austin, that's a

Chrysler," he would think. Robert was mad about motor cars: Benny, from his explanations, knew how the bonnets of the various makes differed. Perhaps he would hear some one shaking a rug out of the window opposite, and then a cheery voice shout:

"'Ullo, Benny. How's your ma?"

"She's very well, thank you, Mrs. Mayo," he would pipe back in a high treble. "How's your baby to-day?"

"Who said he wasn't well?" Mrs. Mayo would

ask in surprise.

"No one. But he was fretful yesterday, wasn't he?"

"Bless the boy. Yes, he was. He's getting another tooth, I think."

Benny was so much too old for his seven years; due, perhaps, to the fact that he spent much of his time in serious conversations of this nature with grown-up people.

By-and-by, he would hear the cloppety-clop, cloppety-clop of the horse drawing the coal cart

coming nearer.

"Mummy, the coal man's coming," he would shout.

"Ask him to leave us a sack, lovey."

So the coal man left his sack and Benny would go

on listening again. Sometimes a passing errand boy, seeing Benny, would shout "Hi, giglamps," not knowing that he was blind. If Robert was there it always roused him to fury, but Benny only chuckled. The words he thought funny, though he did not know exactly what a giglamp was.

One day it had happened that a boy had gone on tormenting them till Robert whispered to Benny:

"Take your glasses off. That'll scare him."

Immediately he had done so, and the boy had given a stifled cry and run away hard.

The two brothers had thought it a splendid joke. Robert was used to the sight of those two red holes that the glasses hid, and Benny's imagination had never really visualized them.

When Robert came back from school they would often go for short walks together. He retold what had happened during the day and Benny asked questions. When they went along the familiar streets with Benny on the side nearer the wall and Robert ready to tell him what to do, it was almost as if he had his sight. Blindness seems to move people to pity more than any other disability. The two children were well-known figures, and so the way was made easy for them by every one they met. With a delicacy of character rare in a child, Benny forbore

to capitalize his infirmity. He behaved as far as it was humanly possible in relation to others as if he had his sight.

On rare days, such as August Bank Holiday, the whole family went to Hampstead Heath. Lucy feared it a little, because sometimes Fred drank more beer than was good for him, and was less careful than usual. But the children loved it. Benny the babble of sound was confusing, but he could remember what it all looked like from visits before his accident. He would stand close to Lucy with his head turned towards the Fair ground. He knew that the swings were tilting madly up and down. He knew that the great merry-go-round was filled with laughing couples. He knew what the gaudy ostriches and horses looked like as they whirled swiftly to the noise of the electric organ playing a popular tune. He knew when some one had hit a cocoanut off the shy. The thick thud it made was different from the sharp click of a miss. He knew what a glow there must be beneath the white and scarlet striped awnings of the many booths. He knew when they passed a drunken man, even if he was silent, by the fumes of his breath. He liked the thick smell of humanity surging past. He knew how the crowd waved paper streamers and banged each other with balloons. It was good. The heat of the burnt-up grass. The sweet ginger beer that you gulped down sitting beneath the trees, eating sandwiches out of paper bags that crackled. He loved the pungent smell of the small sweet oranges that peeled so easily. But above all, he loved thinking what the view looked like if you faced Ken Woods. Past the ground which was almost black with people, past the space beyond that only lovers troubled to reach, till you could see the thick belt of trees that held, within them, all the mystery of the country. Benny loved that word, "country." He asked Lucy about it incessantly.

"What's it like in the morning in the country? Is it different at night to London?"

Lucy forced her memory back and clothed it in words which she tried to make vivid. Whenever the talk turned upon that subject, Sammy would leave off whatever he was doing and come close to listen. He never asked questions, but he gave every word his deep attention. Robert was better than Lucy and could paint the picture in a way that made it all quite real to Benny. Robert had gone one year to the country for a week; when he came back he brought with him a series of experiences which kept them happy for weeks. This "seeing" for

Benny had the effect on Robert of making him view things always in relation to how they would sound when repeated. The family felt this necessity and it quickened their wits and tongues. Fred helped in the game too, but he had never been a talker.

Only Sammy stayed sullenly and determinedly outside the circle. Sometimes he would share the step with Benny and stare at him. It was an unchildlike regard of hostility. If Lucy called only Benny to her, he would look angry and trot off to her as well. He seemed to need her love almost violently. Fred he ignored.

Benny could not go to an ordinary school and there was no special one near enough for him to attend. But he knew as much about history and botany and geography and grammar as Robert did. The constant retelling of his lessons to Benny gave Robert a sounder grounding in those subjects than he could have got in any other way. He knew what he learned, because of the way he had to pass it on. Even the shape of numerals he had been able to explain by making them in wire for Benny to feel. Living in this poverty-stricken street had its compensations. Life did not wait for your invitation but rather pushed itself insistently upon your attention. All the little details that, in a more refined

atmosphere, are hidden away behind shut windows and closed doors showed themselves frankly in Bollard Street. Because the rooms were stuffy, in summer much of the domestic and social life took place in the street. A bed-ridden man would be carried out of a house and put in a bathchair by the front door to give him air. The curbs were used as seats by youths and girls. Women fed their babies on the doorsteps as they talked together. Men drank their beer standing outside the public-house. Children played "tag" up and down the street. Slung by a piece of rope from the cross-piece of a lamppost, small children whirled round and round till the rope wound itself right up against the post. It was all unendingly noisy and smelly. Benny loved it because it was friendly and familiar. The street was not a good one and Lucy worried about its effect on the children. The language the men and women used was often of the foulest; she need not have worried. Children are interested in bad ways only if they know they are forbidden. Hearing so much bad language about them, it held no novelty, and as their parents did not use it, neither did Robert nor Benny. Drunken Sal, who lived opposite the Baines, sometimes had D.T.'s. During that summer she had one of her bad bouts. Robert remembered it vividly,

because Benny woke him up to ask him to see what was happening. He hopped out of bed and looked out of the window. It was a still moonlight night.

"It's Sal," he said. "She must be in the bedroom, but the window's open."

Her voice rose and fell. She kept chanting:

"I'll take my fun where I find it," and then came a string of meaningless obscenities.

"Oh, Sal, give over, do," a weary voice pleaded again and again.

"You'll wake every one up."

"She won't," Benny said. "I can hear some one snoring awful, can't you, Robert?"

"Yes."

The noise Sal was making redoubled, accompanied by the sound of whack, whack, whack.

"Who's she hitting, Robert?"

"Can't think. Must be a bed or something. No one ain't screamed. Can't be any of the children, 'cos they're all sitting on our curb waiting for her to stop. I won't never drink, Benny, if it makes you go on like Sal."

By-and-by he went back to bed and fell asleep. Benny couldn't, he kept seeing Sal swaying about in a dark room and hitting something that never cried out while she chanted: "I'll take my fun where I find it." He wondered what fun it was she'd taken, and who had objected to it.

In the street were various odd characters whom most of the children tormented. One was an old man who, whenever he came back from the publichouse, was inevitably drunk. He would hobble after the taunting children, shouting threats at them. Benny said one day:

"I wish they'd leave him alone, Mum. He's afraid of them, that's why he yells at 'em like that."

"How d'you know, Benny?"

"I can tell by the way his voice goes. He's afraid of them."

"He's a silly old fellow to drink so, son."

Then there was an old lady who brought a camp stool along with her and a basket. No one knew where she slept. She used to put the camp stool down and seat herself on it whilst she unpacked the basket. She had a kettle and a spirit lamp. First she would ask, at the house before which she had camped, for water and fill her kettle; and then when it was boiling she would put an egg inside it. After that, when the egg was cooked, she made her tea with the same water. Benny used to go quite near and listen to what she was doing. The children always collected round her, but for some reason they never

laughed at her. Perhaps her desire for this constant picnic appealed to them. She used to mutter to herself so softly that only Benny could catch her words.

"Thank you, dear God," she said, "for this good meal and all thy loving kindness to me."

Benny when he went away pondered over the words.

On Saturday nights some of the people in the street would get fighting drunk. Then a whole host of friends would try to get them out of Theobald's Road and into their homes, before the police were forced to interfere. If the fight had started over a woman they were not always successful. The sounds of many feet and the noise of some one swearing would wake Benny up with a jerk. He was never frightened, but it was ugly and he hated it. Sometimes the drunken man would break from his friend's grasp and start trying to fight. Generally they seized his arms again and propelled him homewards. Then by-and-by the noise would become fainter and fainter till it died away in the distance. Several times a year the people in Sal's house would give an all-night party. At the start a very old piano would be played by some one who essayed popular dance tunes exceedingly badly. Then, as the drink took effect, the whole of the party would try to sing; always they sang very mournfully, dragging out the song intolerably. Benny couldn't bear that. He would ram his fingers into his ears and try to sleep. It was quieter in winter, because the children went indoors earlier.

Sometimes Lucy would lie in bed next to Fred wondering what would happen to Benny in the future. She wondered if she ought to give him up and try and place him in some home where he could be taught. But he was so delicate and had fierce pains in his head. At the hospital they told her it was better for him not to put any strain on his brain, and that he was very intelligent. Besides she was vague about such things and did not know whom to ask. She could not bear to feel that it might be necessary to part with him. He was such a loving little boy. She wondered if it would be possible for him to serve in the shop when he grew bigger. He was so quick and clever: surely it might be possible. He must be made to feel he was doing something. She saw the need for that. He must never be allowed to feel he was a drag upon them.

When Benny and Robert were twelve and eleven respectively they went for a walk one Saturday afternoon. It took them to the street in which was situated the electric light power station near St. Mar-

tin's Theater. The big doors were open and the hum of machinery made them stop to look. To Benny the noise was exquisitely exciting. He could hear the rhythm in the sound. To Robert the sight was marvelous. It was that moment perhaps which decided his career.

"I'm going to be an engineer," he said.

"Tell me what it looks like, Robby."

"Oh, it's lovely. It's so hard to explain, Benny. Oh! crumbs, it's good."

"What do the things that are making the noise look like?"

"Well, you can't see exactly, they're all black and sort of goldy. There are great big black sort of boxes, only they're round with copper ends." He pressed his face closer to the wire grating that covered the open door. "And oo er, Benny, there are sorts of clocks on the walls. They've got different colored electric lights, like the sort you see on Christmas trees. They keep changing. There're a lot of fellows moving about at the end of the building. They're doing something, but I can't tell what it is."

"Can't you see what's making the hum, Robby?"

"No, it's all inside the big box things."

That was the beginning of a series of explorations they made to every kind of engineering works it was possible to approach. Sometimes a foreman would let them come quite close. The beauty of the great machines had a growing fascination for Robert. He loved to watch giant rollers, performing rhythmically some process over and over again. He loved the sound of the whirling bands that made the wheels turn. He loved the slim bluish and silver arms that went backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards eternally, strong and clean. power he had come to love made itself manifest in the whole of his attitude towards life. He began to notice and hate the squalor and filth he found in Bollard Street. His own house was comparatively clean, though even there, with his mother waging an endless war against the dirt, it was not immaculate. The soot came through the windows and turned anything white a grayish color within a day or two. The mice could not be kept out of the shop. Their dirt polluted everything.

Lucy often puzzled about this overpowering passion for machinery that had taken possession of her second son. He still went with Benny as much as ever. He still explained all that he himself learnt, but his interests now excluded everything that did not turn upon mechanics. He talked mechanics, he thought mechanics, he lived mechanics. It was hard

TO THE VALIANT

to believe that his parents were of peasant stock, who had lived and been brought up upon the land. Lucy did not know, of course, that her father had been possessed by this same passion that now blazed up in Robert.

CHAPTER VII

ROBERT left school when he was fourteen. Fred wanted him to come into the shop and help. Robert did not refuse, but he talked it over with Benny that night when they went to bed.

"You see, Benny, I can't bear the shop. I want to be a motor mechanic."

"Well, then, tell Dad. He'll understand. Tell him, Robby, that I can help much more than I do now, if he'll let me. Ask mum to say I may."

"I don't want to be beastly to them, Benny, but I can do much more if they'll let me get a job somewhere else. You see, I could give them all I earned."

"They won't want you to, Robby. You tell mum about it. She'll understand."

"Dad's so decent. I don't want to hurt him, but I can't just work in the shop. It's so small and sort of smelly."

"I like it," Benny said. "I'd hate it to have no smell. It'd be strange."

"Perhaps, Sammy'd like to help in it when he leaves school."

Sammy was asleep, but they dropped their voices still lower when they spoke about him.

"You know I'm sort of worried about young Sammy," Benny said, "he's awful queer and sly. He's in with all of the bad 'uns round here."

"Yes, he is. It's no good me saying anything. I've smacked his head till I'm sick of it, but it don't seem to make no difference."

"We'll have to look after 'im, Robert. He's going to get into trouble when he gets older if we ain't careful."

By-and-by they stopped talking and went to sleep. Fred, when he understood how much Robert wanted to go into the motor trade, made no objection.

"All right, son," he said. "You go ahead and see if you can get a job. It's your life, not mine, and I wouldn't stand in your way for anything. Perhaps Sammy'll want to come in later on."

For the next few weeks Robert went after jobs. In the mornings he was at the town hall by eight o'clock, studying the vacant columns in the newspapers on the notice board outside. In the end he got into a garage in Maida Vale. It was a big place with a repairing shop attached. The owner, Mr. Joseph, had been impressed by the obvious intelligence Robert showed at the interview.

For the next two years the boy learned every side

of motor mechanics that he could. He learned to drive, and his employer found he could be trusted. He loved the machines too much to hurt them. Generally garage boys are careless monkeys who treat cars as if they were made of cast iron. Not so Robert. He never used an electric starter if there was a handle by which he could swing the engine round first. He never left a tire dust cap half screwed on so that it would fall off when the car went over a bumpy road. He didn't borrow tools from the owner's box and forget to return them. Mr. Joseph realized his worth. When his foreman mentioned that the boy wanted to study the theoretical side of engineering in the evenings, the employer told him he would pay the fees. Robert was one of the rare people in this misfit of industrial life who had a job they really wanted. He was perfectly happy crawling about in his overalls tuning up an He loved the smooth feel of lubricating grease. He could never have enough of the practical side of his work. He would watch an engine working. The shining sliding rods, the smoothly turning cogs filled him with the counterpart of the emotion a musician has when he listens to the perfect rendering of a Bach Fugue. He was a little less keen about the theoretical side of engineering, for he

was bad at mathematics, and it meant applying his mind to it without seeing any immediate results. He went on, however, with a grim determination that was curiously unboylike. He was happy at home, too, for he cared about his family. Benny and he were as close friends as ever, though of necessity they saw less of each other. Robert's influence was discernible in his home. All sorts of contrivances which made for neatness or space appeared there. The rest of the family, except for Sammy, responded unconsciously to his efforts.

When Sammy left school he agreed at once to help in the shop, but in effect his presence was a hindrance. He gave overweight to his friends and underweight to the people he did not like. He was careless in giving change, and once or twice his father had a suspicion that he had been more than careless. Fred worried about it, but he said nothing because he was not certain.

By-and-by Sammy started to come up to Joseph's garage on his half-days off. Robert, in his passion for his job, believed that everybody else must share it. He let Sammy help him when he was doing an easy repair, such as mending a puncture or cleaning spark plugs.

"My, they've got some lovely 'buses here," Sammy

said. "Why should the blasted swine own 'em?"

"Don't know, but they do. What puzzles me though is, that so many of 'em don't drive themselves. Fancy letting any one else drive your car when you could do it yourself!"

"I know how to drive a car," Sammy said. His brother looked round in surprise.

"You do, Sammy?"

"Yes."

Robert went over to test the tube he was mending; as he came back he saw Sammy slip something into his pocket. He thought:

"Now what's he taken?"

"Sammy, you've just put something in your trousers pocket. What was it?"

"Nothing," Sammy said, getting red.

"Now look here, I seen you put something in your pocket. You show me at once or I'll take it, see."

For a moment the two glared at each other, strangely alike and yet completely unlike. Robert in his overalls, fair-haired and blue-eyed, lightly balanced upon his feet, stared into Sammy's eyes, which in the end turned aside. He groped in his pocket and took out a Schrader gauge for testing tires.

Robert went quite pale.

"You dirty little thief," he said, snatching it from the other's hand. "Taking some one else's property."

He aimed a blow at Sammy's head, but already his brother had turned and run out of the garage.

That was the last time he came to the garage with Robert. But he came again alone. This time he crept in one Sunday afternoon when he knew there was only the old watchman Mike about. Mike was deaf, and whilst he was downstairs in the basement, Sammy took his chance. He saw a smart Chrysler coupé near the entrance and within one minute he had started the engine and driven it out.

It was two days before the police recovered the car. Most of its fittings were missing. A week later they got Sammy.

The calamity came upon the Baines as an immense surprise. Nobody blustered. It was simply something they could not understand. Disgrace. Their Sammy in trouble with the police. When the boy did not come in to supper that Sunday night they were not particularly anxious. He sometimes went off by himself without saying anything about it.

Robert went to work on Monday morning quite happily. When he got to the garage he heard about the stolen Chrysler. A boy who had been near the

place at the time volunteered the information that he had been given a lift in the car by Sammy. He did not know who the driver was, but Robert did from the description. For an hour he went on with his work automatically. Then he walked over to Mr. Joseph's office by the garage door.

"Sir, may I speak to you, please?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Sir, I'm not sure, but I think I know who has taken the Chrysler."

"Who?"

"My brother."

Mr. Joseph, with his racial feeling for family, understood. He said gruffly:

"Don't worry, Baines. We'll see what can be done." Later he said: "This business, whatever happens, won't affect your position here at all. I trust you as if you were my own son."

Then he left Robert alone to get himself in hand, and went off to telephone to the police.

If only Sammy had not pawned the car fittings, the whole thing would probably have been treated simply as a boyish escapade. But those pawned fittings made it all different.

Robert went with Fred and Lucy to the police court. The place seemed airless. The Baines had

never been in one before. When they got there the police were quite kind. They showed them where to sit. Mr. Joseph was present and so was the owner of the car. They all sat together in a row, just behind the Press bench. Lucy hung her head. She had not cried since the news had come, but in her mind was a sense of utter misery. She kept thinking about Sammy when he was a tiny boy. She remembered how he had looked. She thought:

"Oh, poor young thing! My Sammy! He'll be feeling so afraid and pretending he isn't. But he shouldn't have done it. Risking ruining Robert's chance. . . . And Benny, it's upset him horribly. Oh, Sammy, my little boy!"

Fred sat upright looking ahead. Now and again he straightened his legs uneasily. On the right-hand side of the court was a door marked "Prisoners only." Robert kept his eyes away from it. He knew he was going to want to blub when Sammy came through it. There was a kind of iron gangway just in front of the Press bench. Robert thought:

"That must be the dock."

In front of it was another gangway with some chairs in it; then some more desks for the prosecuting counsels and the court clerk. On the right of the room were some cross benches set above the level of the floor, where the defending counsels and solicitors sat. In the center of the court, still a little higher up, was yet another bench for the magistrate. On the left was a sort of pulpit with a wooden canopy over it. That was the witness box. Robert thought:

"It looks like a Punch and Judy show."

There was a constant coming and going. People with sheaves of papers kept tripping over the Baines's feet, as they sat patiently waiting. Once the owner of the Chrysler bent over to Fred. He was a man of about forty, with a big mustache and brown eyes.

"I'm sorry about your son," he said. "I hope they'll bind him over."

"Thank you, sir," Fred said. "I can't think what came over him."

"Oh, well," the man with the mustache said, "we may learn that he didn't pawn the fittings himself."

"Yes," Fred answered, but Robert thought: "No, we shan't. Sammy did. He's crooked, worse luck."

There seemed to be a great many policemen present.

"They look so odd," Lucy thought, and then, "of course, it's 'cos they haven't got their helmets on."

By-and-by, the clerk to the court came in, and

fussed about with ink and pens at the magistrate's desk. Then at last the magistrate entered. The clerk shouted "Silence" and the whole court rose and remained standing until the official was seated. The blood rushed to Robert's head. His hands felt wet and clammy. He crossed his arms and stared at the man sitting above them, at the far end of the court. He had white hair and a pale face. His eyes were heavily lidded and his lips a little too thin. The love of power and the responsibility that goes with it had cut lines upon his forehead and molded his expression. He hid himself from the public behind a mask that only betrayed itself in the cynical smile he occasionally allowed to curve his mouth.

The first case down was a request for an adjournment of an action between two claimants. The magistrate agreed. Then the clerk shouted: "Number 2, William Eardley."

A young motor lorry driver stepped forward and was given a seat in the gangway immediately in front of the dock. A policeman went into the witness box and gabbled the oath mechanically. He gave evidence that the lorry William Eardley had been driving had a defective silencer. The magistrate asked Eardley if he had anything to say.

"Well, sir, it was like this. The constable stopped

me where he says he did, and tells me me silencer ain't effective. I tells 'im I was on my way to have it repaired, but he says that ain't no go. That's all, sir."

"Fined two shillings for having a defective silencer."

"Thank you, sir." William Eardley passed with a policeman through the door marked "Prisoners only." Presumably to pay his two shillings.

"Number three. Henry Tullis."

This time a man came through the prison door with a constable. He was small and thin. His face was white and a patch of dried blood was smeared across it. He carried a small basket in one hand, such as railway workers take their lunch in; his cap was in the other. He was put in the dock just in front of the Baines. They could see only the back of his head. Something about his attitude made Lucy want to cry. Fred and Robert looked down at the floor, ashamed for him.

Again a constable entered the witness box and gabbled his oath. Then he gave particulars of how the man had been brought into the police station drunk.

"He came in on an ambulance from Paddington Hospital, sir. He was drunk."

The magistrate interrupted in a clear cold voice with a question:

"Why did you think he was drunk?"

"His breath smelt strongly of drink, sir."

"Go on."

"The police sergeant saw him and said to him, 'You're drunk.'"

"What did the prisoner reply?"

"He said, 'No, I ain't.' He said he'd come with two pounds in his pocket from Oxford, on a railway pass. He had the return half of the pass in his pocket, but only two shillings." The constable stopped and the magistrate said to the prisoner:

"Have you anything to tell the Court?"

The man made no reply of any kind. The police officer standing near him said to him sharply:

"His worship says have you anything to say."

The man neither moved nor gave any indication that he had heard the question. Robert felt his toes crinkle up with emotion.

The magistrate said:

"Can he hear me?"

"Yes, sir, he can hear all right," the officer near the man answered.

Again the magistrate asked sharply:

"Have you anything to tell the Court? Is what the police witness has said true?"

For a moment there was silence, then the man seemed to wake up. He spoke in a low voice to the officer near him.

"Address the magistrate, not me," shouted the policeman. The man relapsed into silence again.

"He says he don't understand anything he's heard, sir," the officer volunteered. The magistrate pondered a moment. His thin fingers beat on the desk in front of him. He thought:

"There are several points I don't understand. Why the hospital took him to the police station. Where he was found and so on. He's cut his head. I've no time to inquire further. He'd better go. No good asking him any more."

"Has he been here before?"

"No, sir."

"I dismiss the case under the First Offender's Act. You are discharged."

The man stayed where he was till the policeman shook him.

"Come on. You can go."

He stumbled out of the dock and almost ran through the prisoner's door. His little basket swung from his hand as he went. The hearing of these other cases had steadied the Baines. But when the clerk shouted "Number 4. Sampson Baines," they all started violently and their hearts began to beat. The rest of the people in the court faded away. It became suddenly terribly real, as if, from being spectators at a play, they had become actors. The prisoners' door opened again and Sammy came in. He blushed and then, propelled by a policeman, walked into the dock. His family had not seen him for more than a week. He was wearing a new overcoat and had a check cap in his hand. Lucy felt her heart melting in tenderness. She wanted to put her arms round him. Fred thought:

"What's wrong with him? Why ain't he straight like the others? What's the matter with him?"

Robert thought:

"He's pawned them things all right. He bought those new clothes with what he got. Poor old Sammy; why's he want to go crooked?"

The case was soon over. The owner of the Chrysler gave evidence identifying some of the fittings of the car which had been recovered. He asked the magistrate to deal with the boy as leniently as he could.

The magistrate said:

"Are his parents here?" Lucy and Fred both stood up. Fred was asked if he could at all explain what had occurred.

"No, sir, I can't. He has not been a bad son, Sammy hasn't." Fred meant it as he said it. He forgot in his love, those little miscalculations of change. Robert would have said the same thing if he had been asked.

"If you'll give the lad another chance his mother and me and his brother will take care of him, sir."

The magistrate looked sharply at Sammy. He saw that he was affected, his head was bowed and his ears were scarlet. He thought:

"That man's all right. The boy may not be a rogue. He'd better have his chance."

So he bound over Sammy, who went home with his family. Nobody upbraided him.

That night Fred and Lucy talked together after they went to bed. "I felt so sorry for him, Fred. He was unhappy for all his brazen looks. He is so young, Fred. It made me feel I'd failed him in some way."

Her husband said nothing, only put his arm out and drew her near him. She smoothed his hair back from his forehead. Fred was used to this caress, but it never failed to move him. They were silent as they thought about Sammy.

Presently he said:

"Lucy, how'd it be if I went and saw his old schoolmaster, Mr. Crofts? You know he always took an interest in Robert and Sammy. Maybe he could advise us."

"Why is it we know such a little about him, Fred? Benny and Robert I sort of know by heart, but Sammy's never let on what he's thinking. I've often wondered what his mind's been up to. He's been kind of jealous of Benny for years. I knew that. The way he used to glare at me if I kissed Benny and not him, when he was ever so small. D'you remember, Fred?"

"Yes. What I'm worried about, Lucy, is what to do that's best for him. We're kind of responsible. The magistrate let him off 'cos we promised to see he went straight. I think I'll go along and have a word with Mr. Crofts. What do you say, Luce?"

"Yes, Fred. Maybe it'd be a good thing. I do feel somehow as if I've done wrong by him. He never got the sort of spoiling the baby gets, Fred. I didn't have time with Benny needing me so bad the first years that Sammy was alive."

"You couldn't help it, Luce. You've been a good mother to the boys. Don't fret."

The next day Fred left Lucy in charge of the shop and went to the council school. The headmaster was an intelligent man. His school was far too big for him to be able to do more than run it efficiently, but part of that efficiency was due to his instinctive knowledge of psychology and a good memory. Any one in charge of a number of other human beings must possess a good memory, if he is to be a success. Mr. Crofts had one. He was a small man, with gray eyes that gave an impression of keenness. He did not keep Fred waiting for more than five minutes. Fred asked him if he could recollect Sammy.

"Of course, I do, Mr. Baines. A boy with rather an obstinate mouth and blue eyes and red hair. He was a difficult fellow. Never said an unnecessary word and was always fighting."

"Yes, that's Sammy all right," Fred said. Then he told Mr. Crofts exactly what had happened.

"H'm, I'm sorry. I really am sorry."

"What I wondered, sir, though it seems rather bold to come bothering you about some one who's left school, is whether you can give me advice as to what we ought to do with him. Me and his mother, sir, want to do what's best and we simply don't know what is."

"Have you asked the boy himself, Mr. Baines?"

"No, sir, not yet. We thought we'd like to see you first. He may have let on what he wanted to be here. He never says anything at home."

Mr. Crofts thought for a while, then he said:

"Look here, there was one teacher here with whom your son seemed to get on. He's a Mr. Kerr. If you'll wait ten minutes his class will be out, and I'll ask him to come along and see if he can help."

"That's kind of you, sir, I'm sure. I'm that sorry to give you all this bother."

"Don't you worry on that account, Mr. Baines," he said, and meant it.

So Fred waited. He sat in the stiff chair by the headmaster's desk. The walls of the room were distempered in the reseda green so beloved of Government departments. There were, around the room, some framed photographs of groups of the children who had been at the school. Fred thought:

"I ought to 'ave come here before about Sammy. This teacher's a nice thoughtful man. Funny as young Sammy never mentioned no Mr. Kerr. Lucy's right, we don't seem to know nothing about

the boy ourselves. Not even Benny doesn't, not much." He tried to remember what Sammy had been like as a baby and as a child. His impressions were blurred and faint. One or two things stood out.

"He were awful upset that time Lucy cut her hand bad at Christmas. I can see him now looking as if he'd been hurt himself. Then there was that time he were so upset about that cove that got smashed by a 'bus. Funny as I can't remember nothing except him hurt."

Mr. Kerr came along in answer to the message the headmaster had sent.

He and Fred shook hands. He was a big man and somehow completely unlike the popular idea of an elementary school teacher. Mr. Crofts explained what Fred had come about.

"Poor old Sammy," Mr. Kerr said after he had finished. "I thought he'd have trouble. Now about what I think would be best for him. Have you ever asked him what he'd like to do if he had his way, Mr. Baines?"

"No, I can't say I have, not in so many words."
"Well, ask him if he'd like to go on a wheat farm.
Why, he's mad about that and the land. I discovered it all by chance. You see, I'm a New Zea-

lander, and he asked me some rather intelligent questions one day about that country. We got talking and I found he was eaten up with desire for the life. He hates towns and masses of people. At first I thought it might be some sort of a wild west complex he'd got. But it wasn't that. He said he knew what a hard life a farmer's laborer had, because he'd heard you talking about it, but that he'd rather be one for a start than anything else on earth."

"Well, you have surprised me, sir," Fred said. "Neither me nor the lad's mother knew anything at all about this. It makes things a lot easier if he feels this way. Why, he might like to go to Canada or Australia under one of them Government schemes of land settlement."

"Yes, that would probably be the solution," Mr. Crofts said. Fred got up.

"Well, I'm very grateful for what you've told me and I won't take up your time any longer."

"That's all right, Mr. Baines. Write and let me know if I can be of any use in sending records about his work here or anything."

"That I will, sir, and thank you."

"And give him this message from me, will you?"
Mr. Kerr said. "Say, the land takes the best out of
you, and it does it all the time and for ever; that it

takes a man not to give in to the struggle, and that he must be a good man to win. He'll remember something if you'll say that, and it may help him a bit. I expect he's pretty miserable."

They shook hands, and Fred went out. Going home he kept repeating the message, so that he could give it to Sammy word for word.

In the end it was all settled satisfactorily. Sammy went to Canada, under a scheme the Salvation Army ran. After he had gone, the design round Benny grew a little closer, as if to fill up the gap that Sammy's going had caused. The design the family made was a beautiful one.

Lucy a little in the background. Happy in the knowledge of Fred's love, happy in the perfect sympathy that existed between her and Benny; happy in the well-being of Robert and the steps he was carving one by one towards his ultimate goal.

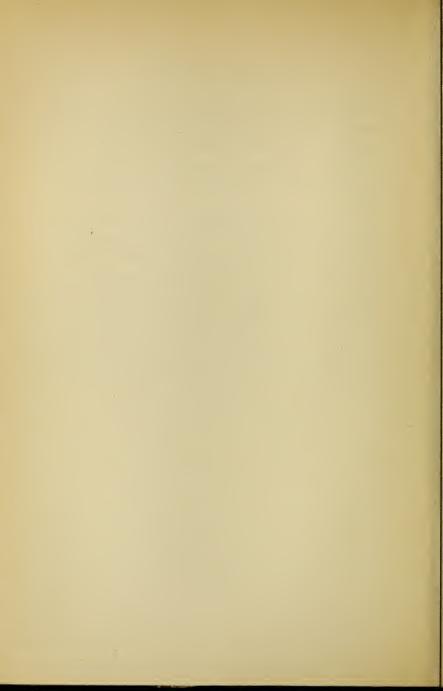
Then Fred, less vivid of personality than his wife, still further away from the actual core of the whole, but also not ill content with his lot.

Robert was very near the center of the design. His outlook broadened as he grew older, but still he retained his passion for mechanics. Adolescence had touched him lightly. He was so completely absorbed by his love of moving steel and the rhythm

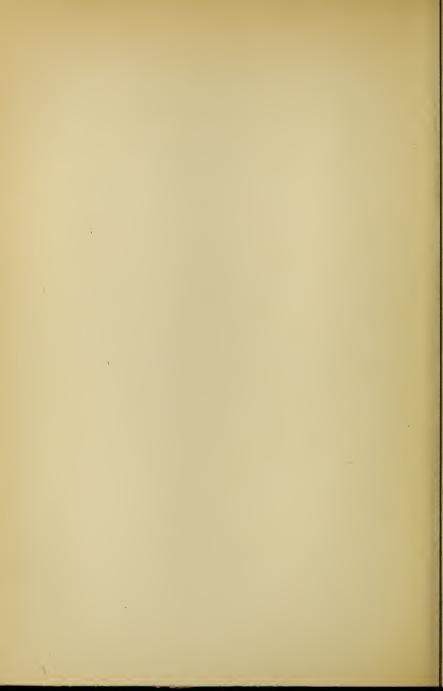
TO THE VALIANT

of motion in machinery, that his body had not craved women. Besides, he shared his spare time with Benny. It was Benny he took to the theater, it was upon Benny he spent any money he had for pleasure, it was for Benny he used his imagination and his tongue.

As for Benny, he remained the very keynote of the plan of their lives. This small united family were set in the midst of desperate squalor. Against the background of a constantly changing London. Against the noise and ceaseless decay of a city too old for its generation. The rough edges which Sammy's going had made in the fabric of their life had to be knitted together. He would return some day to them; his place would be there when the time came.



PART THREE



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CHAPTER VIII

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Benny and Robert sat on top of a number 29 'bus. It thundered along Tottenham Court Road. The street shone in the steely light of the October afternoon. A policeman put up his hand. The stream of traffic welled up behind him. He put his hand down, the stream slid smoothly onwards. Presently the lamps twinkled out on the pavements. The road shimmered in the light. Past Mornington Crescent Station, up the High Street. Now the shining tramlines sped onwards over the hill, whilst the red dragons chased one another along the road. Benny and Robert rarely talked on a 'bus. Each enjoyed the sensations from the impressions they received. To Robert the road held a measure of beauty that only a Londoner could appreciate. He liked the crudity of life that was apparent here. He thought the brightly lit butcher's shop, with its gesticulating salesmen, a jolly sight. Woolworth's windows sent forth a rainbow of color. The sheen on iron and steel in the tool shop flashed into his eyes. The rosy glare from a window of lamp-shades vied with the cubes of color in the greengrocer's next door. Orange and red, yellow and green, the piles of fruit threw cascades of color into the air. Posters blazed

upon the hoardings, the drapers' windows added their tints to the flamboyant street. It was all so quick and moving. Saturday evening was good when you happened to be off duty. To Benny in his perpetual monotony of sightlessness the ride presented the same excitement through different senses. The smell of petrol from the motors stung his nostrils. The wind brought the strangely satisfying smell of frying from the fish and chip shop. The dust from the pavements whirled high up in the air and carried with it the smell of oranges and sawdust. In the wealth of sound he could hear a hundred causes. The grind of car brakes, the sharp clang of a tram bell, the hooting of motor horns, the shuffling and tapping of the people walking along the street. The yells of the newsboys, the ringing of an ambulance bell. The lilt of the latest record blaring from a gramophone shop. The thin high note of a baby crying. The squeak of an errand-boy's bicycle. The shouts of the butcher reeling off his patter to the careful housewife. And above all, laughter, goodnatured laughter. It was all so safe and friendly on a Saturday evening, when Robert was off duty.

They were on their way to visit Dick Ponting. Robert had met him a year ago. He was a young man who had been left a garage by his father. He was a year younger than Robert; that would make him twenty-four. Benny and Robert often went to see him on Saturdays. This time his sister would be there. She had just come back from India, where her husband had died. The garage was in Park Street. Dick lived in a flat that adjoined it. wanted Robert to come into the business with him. Robert had so far refused, because he did not like the idea of being a partner until he had some capital to put into the concern, and of course he had none. Dick told him that he was a proud fool, because his knowledge and experience was what the garage needed, not capital. The matter was always being brought up by Dick.

They got off the 'bus at Camden Town Station and walked along Park Street. The shop windows reflected their figures. Both were tall. Robert's occupation had given him a muscular development that Benny lacked. Both had wide shoulders and slender hips. They had fulfilled their boyhood's promise of good looks. Benny was dark with a faintly aquiline nose which his glasses accentuated. The keenness of his features was combated by the almost womanly sweetness of his mouth. Robert,

on the other hand, was more like Fred, with a short well-cut nose. His eyes were a brilliant dark blue and heavily lashed. His mouth was firm.

They swung along. Robert with his hand tucked into his brother's arm. When they reached Pulford Street they stopped at the door next to the garage and rang the bell. They could hear Dick's footsteps running down the stairs. Then he opened the door.

"Hullo, you two. This is good. Come along up. Rita's here."

They followed him up. Benny first and then Robert. The door to the living-room at the top of the stairs was open. A woman with a slim figure dressed in black was standing by the fireplace facing them as they came up. Dick went in and turned to lead Benny towards his sister. Robert thought:

"My, she's beautiful." She was not exactly that, but her gray eyes were good; so was her coloring. When she smiled, Robert's thought was perhaps nearer the truth. She moved forward a little nervously to meet Benny. She smiled as if he could see her and then a queer hesitant expression came over her face, as she remembered that he could not. Something gentle and moving happened to Robert as he watched her. Then Dick said:

"And this is Robert. Robert, my sister Rita."

He took her hand; though it was soft, it returned his handclasp firmly. For some reason he had to stifle a quick sigh. It was odd. They all sat down round the fire. Rita and Benny talked together. Robert knew his brother liked her by the gay note in his voice. Meanwhile he and Dick spoke about cars and the price of petrol. Presently Rita said:

"I'll bring tea in. The kettle must be boiling." Her brother and Robert jumped up to help, but she said:

"Nobody need really help, but if Mr. Baines likes to help carry in the tray he may."

"Please," Robert said, and then for no reason at all went red. They went into the kitchen. He closed the door. All his blood seemed to be pounding at his heart. He was afraid that she must be aware of its thudding. Rita, however, went unconcernedly to the dresser to get the tea from the canister.

"God, she'll think I'm mad saying nothing at all," he thought, but he could not think of a solitary thing to say.

"He is a shy fellow," she thought as she went over to the gas stove to fill the teapot.

"May I ask you something?"

"Please." He wished he could think of more to

say than just that one word. He was suddenly miserable and all his clothes felt wrong.

"Did your brother lose his sight in an accident?"

The spell upon Robert's tongue was removed. He told her what had happened.

She nodded once or twice. When he had finished she said:

"He seems happy enough on the surface."

"Oh, it's deeper than that. He's one of the happiest and best fellows I've ever known in my life."

"He's beautiful," she said, and the expression did not strike Robert as unusual. "Yes, I think so too. It's partly the way his thoughts seem to sort of show on his face, or does that sound crazy?"

"Not a bit. I expect it's true."

She thought:

"He's got a fine person for a brother, too, if I'm not mistaken."

They returned to the other room, Robert carrying the tea.

The evening went by at a pace that seemed impossibly quick to Robert. He could not keep his eyes off Rita. He thought:

"She will think I'm a low swine staring at her like this." He tried to look away, but again and again his gaze went to where she was sitting. Once she did catch his close regard, but she only smiled back serenely.

At eleven o'clock Benny said:

"We ought to be going, Robby, it must be late."

Robert felt as if his inside was melting. He thought, "I know what's happened to me. I suppose this is what being in love with a woman means. Oh! it hurts. I must make sure of seeing her again." He could not bring himself to do anything about it, and it was only solved at the last moment by Benny, who said, as they shook hands with Rita:

"I wish you'd come and see us. The street our shop's in's awfully poor and dirty, but I'd like you to come."

"I want to. When may I?"

Benny said: "Well, next Thursday evening, how would that do?"

"Fine."

So they all shook hands, and Robert and Benny went down the steps. Outside the air was chilly, but Robert breathed it in ecstatically. He felt as if he had just escaped a great danger.

"Let's walk, Bobby. It'll be good for us."

Robert was silent till Benny said:

"What did she look like? She had such a lovely voice."

His brother took a deep breath. It was the first time in his life he hadn't wanted to tell Benny something he'd asked him.

"Well, Benny," he said, "she's got dark hair that kind of waves back from her forehead and big gray eyes. Her skin's very smooth-looking and sort of olive color, more ivory than peaches. And she's got a lovely smile and even teeth. I think that's all."

"And what's her figure like? Is she tall?"

"Not very: At least, I suppose she is rather for a woman. She comes up a bit higher than our shoulders. She's very slender."

"And her hands I know about," said Benny.
"They were long, and she'd thin fingers with oval
nails. I expect she had got a good complexion. The
skin on her hands is so soft. How old would you
say she was?"

"Oh, she's the same age as me. I know she's a year older than Dick and he's a year younger than me."

"Well, I like her frightfully," Benny said, "and I hope we see a lot of her."

That night Robert lay awake a long time. He thought:

"Suppose I'm bound to get this love business worse than other fellows who've got over it early.

Never knew what it was to get a woman in your mind this way. Rita—God, that's a lovely name. It's all got to stop right away now though, as far as I'm concerned. I've never known Benny want to see a woman again before. And so I'd better just turn over and go to sleep."

But sleep would not come. He lay there with a new expression on his young face. Here was something that hard work and determination could not win, because he must not win it. "Seems as if giving up's a lot harder than trying to get a thing," he thought miserably, then grinned in spite of himself. "A lot of giving up you're doing, mutt. Why on earth you should think she'd as much as look at you, I don't know. But it's not even being able to try and make her that pinches." After a while, Benny next him, turned over in his sleep so that his hip touched Robert's back. The warmth of the contact comforted him somehow. He dozed off almost at the same moment as he thought:

"Dear old Benny."

CHAPTER IX

On the following Thursday Robert rushed back from work. Rita was already there when he arrived. She was sitting in the living-room behind the shop. Benny was in his usual chair by the fire. Fred was still serving customers. A kind of pride had kept Robert from suggesting that his mother should make any special preparations for her coming. Benny, however, had been more simple over the whole thing. Robert saw that at once by the vase of chrysanthemums that stood on the table. Flowers were not usual in the Baines' house. It was an ugly drab room. Lucy wore her black dress, with the blue apron over it in which she served in the shop. Robert shook hands with Rita awkwardly.

"Hullo, Mum," he said.

"Is it raining, Robert?"

"Not much now, but the roads are like grease."

At eight o'clock the shop was closed for the night and Fred joined them.

Then Lucy laid the table for supper. Rita could not help noticing how poor the equipment was. The Baines were unself-conscious about it. Poverty was for them such a real and tangible thing, that money spent on articles that were not absolutely essential seemed a waste. If you could buy something that had a realizable value at the pawnshop, that was different, but the small sum they could have afforded for plate was obviously best kept for other things. Robert helped his mother with the preparations. Once she said:

"Sit down, son, you know I can manage this alone," but he shook his head. She had prepared a nice meal for them. Robert found it hard to do justice to it. After they had finished they drew their chairs to the fire.

Rita wanted to offer to help Lucy wash up, but she did not like to do so. Fred pulled out his pipe and the boys smoked cigarettes. When all was neat and clean Lucy came and sat down with them. Rita liked her. She saw that her features were good. She was still under forty-five, yet she looked old with the premature age that the fight with poverty brings. Fred, too, had taken the bite of the years badly. He sat hunched up in his chair staring at the fire, with one big hand round the bowl of his pipe. Rita thought he looked out of place, but she could not discern what was wrong. Lucy knew. Even now, after all these years, he longed for the land. When they first came to London, Fred had hated it. Sometimes he had stretched himself

wearily after a day with the fruit barrow in the streets and said:

"Oh, Luce, I could do with a real walk through the meadows to-night."

She knew he was thinking of evenings after a shower. When the earth streamed with perfume. When the long grass dragged with a soft swishing noise across his heavy boots. She knew how he wanted the space of the country. Sometimes in those early days she had seen him standing in the street before he came up to bed with his head raised, looking at the close clusters of stars that, even in Bawling Street, were not always hidden. If the wind blew he sniffed at it and she followed him in thought up the rich slopes that breathed the scent of cowslips and the sap of budding trees. Watching him now sitting peacefully by the fire with his children, and with this new young woman who had somehow come into the design, she thought once more:

"Fred, you do be a good one."

"Mum, I'm going to the corner to get something to drink. What shall I bring for you?" Robert said.

"Well, what will Mrs. Darrell have?" Lucy said. Rita turned to Benny:

"What does your mother like usually?"

"Oh, mum's not much of a one for drink. She likes port wine, don't you, Mum?"

"Yes, or whatever's going."

"I like port, too," Rita said.

So Robert set out with the big earthenware jug to bring back the beer.

"The lad's very quiet to-night," Fred remarked when he had gone.

"He's tired, perhaps," Lucy said.

Benny thought: "He's so shy about Rita, he doesn't know what to do." He didn't feel in the least shy himself, only a little elated.

Robert came back with the beer and a bottle of port. He fetched the glasses from the kitchen and opened the bottle. He gave Lucy a glass and then one to Rita.

"It looks as if Labor may get in at the General Election," Fred said.

"I shan't believe it till it happens, this time. We thought we were in all right last time and look what happened," Robert said.

"Can't think why the workers are so crazy," Benny remarked.

"It isn't that they're crazy, son. It's because they

have no faith. Any chap you talk to agrees with what Labor preaches, but he can't believe it can come true."

"Well," Lucy said, "it's not surprising. He's brought up hearing the clap-trap talked about 'there always were poor and there always will be.' He's come to think it really means something."

"But why doesn't he try to find out it isn't true by giving the other side a chance? He's only got to look at the facts— Two Labor Governments in power, both times without real majorities, and look at the good they managed to do. Only on social service of course, and then nothing more'n the fringe touched, but if he just looks at that record, it ought to show him."

"Are you all Socialists?" Rita asked.

"Rather," Benny said.

"You couldn't live in this district long and not be," Robert explained.

"That's true, though it's disheartening the number of people who still vote Tory round here. Of course, it's only those with what I call the slum mentality who do. The ones who are still struggling to live decently vote Labor all right," Fred said.

"I don't know much about politics," Rita said

apologetically, "but I can't see why the Conservatives or Liberals can't do as much good as Labor."

It was Benny who answered her.

"It always seems to me to be best explained this way. A Tory has to believe that all the individuals who have the power of money use it properly. Labor answers that they're human and probably won't and therefore the power of the Government must be used for the common good, even at the expense of a few individuals."

It was Lucy who went on:

"Take this district, Mrs. Darrell. Now if all the individuals that own property here really cared about human beings, they'd have repaired the houses or knocked them down years ago."

"But perhaps they can't afford to," Rita said.

"That's the whole point," Robert said. "If they really cared and couldn't afford to do anything about it, then they'd have sold out to some one who could. All the land's valuable, because of the congestion. It might have meant turning the people out of their homes, but it could only have been a good thing in the end."

"Ah, you've no idea of the filth and awful conditions under which the people live here. I could show you places in this street, where little children

are being brought up, that would make you sick. It would make the people who own it sick too, but they just avoid knowing about it," Lucy said.

"And that's why a Tory Government that believes in the liberty of the individual to make his personal profit at the expense of other people, isn't ever going to be able to help the workers. Look at the state of the mines. All that trouble with the mining industry came about through the Government refusing to interfere with the property of private individuals. And remember where it led us. It wasn't until they nationalized them that the muddle was ended. And look what it cost us to then. We could have saved a lot of that money if we'd done it ten years earlier," Robert said.

"You see," Fred said, "Labor's policy goes right down to the center of things. It doesn't just stop at mending the social ills that any sane person could cure if he wanted to, but it sets out to teach a principle that we'll have to preach for goodness knows how long. It's quite simple, just that we mustn't live for ourselves alone, any longer. That it's the common good that's got to count. And the common good not only of our country, but of the whole human race. That's what we've got to aim for and it'll lead us God knows where in the meantime."

They were all silent after that, turning over in their minds what had been said.

Rita found the family very attractive and they made her feel tender. There was something moving in the way they seemed to be struggling out of the dimness of the slums they dwelt in. She sensed a loyalty and fineness in their attitude towards the world and one another. Her brother had already told her as much about Robert's struggles as he knew.

Again she looked at Lucy sitting there silent and relaxed. She remembered the poignant story of Benny's accident and, with the intuitiveness that the sensitive possess, she knew for one second the agony that the mother must have suffered. Some emotion penetrated the protective shell of hardness by which she guarded herself against the stabs of life. She thought:

"I'm so glad I can still feel hurt this way. I thought perhaps my senses were numb."

Her mind slid back to her husband and his death. She had realized that she didn't really love him very soon after her marriage. He had not been either tender or sensitive. He had wanted her body honestly and frankly, but his love seemed concentrated on that alone. It was a limitation she had

fought against as soon as she had understood it fully, but it only wounded him because he did not know what it was she hated. She had had a baby, who, not being strong enough to stand the Eastern climate, had died. Then her husband had died too, and at twenty-five she had come back to England feeling numb and wanting to remain so. Already, however, she knew that she was going to be dragged back into the pulsing agony of living. She sighed.

Robert sat quite still. Love of woman was so far out of his experience. He felt terror and anger and humiliation all warring within him against the tenderness and desire for Rita.

"Oh, it's going to be horrible," he thought, "having her around like this, looking at Benny. I wish to God I hadn't met her!" Yet he knew it was untrue; that he was really glad. He had a feeling of mental darkness pricked with shining lights, and somewhere within that state he was groping his way.

When Rita left he went with her.

"I'd like the walk back," he said.

Outside it had ceased raining, and there was a fairly thick fog. They walked into Theobald's Road. The light from the lamps was not strong enough to penetrate the density for more than a yard or two. Each time they moved beyond the light's

orbit, Robert felt as if they were alone upon the earth. He put his hands deep into his pockets; his shoulders were hunched up. Rita thought he was just shy and would probably prefer to be left in peace. When they came to cross the road, at the last moment, he heard a motor approaching and his hand seized her arm involuntarily. He trembled violently. Rita said:

"Are you very cold?"

"Yes, a bit."

"Why don't you let me go on alone? It seems such a pity to bring you all this distance out of your way."

He shook his head.

"Please, it's no trouble." He had the idea that if he glanced at his hand, which still tingled from the contact with her arm, it would look different.

"You are a fool," he thought. "Calf love late. That's what's the matter with you. It's going to be worse before it's better, so get a grip on yourself. She must think I'm a dolt. I never say anything to her at all. And my mind's packed with things I'd like to talk about. Gosh, she's lovely!"

"We'd better wait here for a 'bus," he said, and then, "It's a beastly night. We've got all the awful winter months ahead." "Don't you like the cold?"

"Hate it."

"So do I. That's what I shall miss the most in leaving India. We were never cold there."

A part of his mind registered the thought:

"Funny thing to miss most. Perhaps she wasn't too happy."

"The East must be ripping," he said. "I've often tried to imagine what it must be like."

"The color's almost unbelievable. I mean of everything. When I got there first, after our cool grays, I could hardly believe my eyes. The violence of the contrasts seemed to make the heat greater. Tell me, how is it Benny seems to know what things look like that he can't possibly have seen?"

"It's awfully queer, isn't it? I don't know how he manages it myself. His fingers must have extra nerves or something, they seem to see and know things by touch. It's as if he saw with them." He felt freer and happier talking about Benny.

At last a number 68 'bus came, going towards Camden Town.

"Shall we go inside?" Robert asked.

"No, outside, please."

So they went up to the top. Rita sat down and made room for him by her. He hardly dared to

take his place, because he remembered how he had felt when he had touched her arm crossing the street.

He took a packet of Players out of his pocket and lit a cigarette. Rita felt the electric atmosphere and once more she spoke about Benny to ease it.

"He seems so wise for his age," she said.

"Well, he sees things more clearly than we do, in a way, perhaps. There's less of the sort of distraction that sight gives. And then you see, he's never had to scramble for a job. What I mean is, he's always been able to think what he really thinks, instead of having to fit in with other people's views."

"It's odd, but when one speaks to him, he seems to speak of you all the time, and when one speaks to you, you seem to speak of him."

"Yes, we're more close than most brothers are because I've always taken him about."

"He says you've been his eyes."

"Did Benny say that to you?"

"Yes."

He thought: "Fancy him telling her that. It just shows." For the rest of the ride he tried to frame words to ask her when he would see her again. He said at last:

"I must pop in and see Dick in a day or so, say Saturday night. Are you likely to be there?"

She turned and looked at him.

"Yes."

They stopped at the door and shook hands.

"It's been so good to meet you all," she said.

"Do come again soon. Benny will love it, and the others too."

He stood there looking at her. There was something she found disturbing in his regard. She smiled at him and put the key she had taken out of her bag into the lock. He waited there until the door shut behind her. Then he shivered and sighed. He walked back to Bloomsbury. The streets were quiet. They looked wide in the spaciousness of night. He thought:

"Why can't I talk to her proper? It's as if something held on to my tongue. She speaks so well. I wish I'd tried more to learn how to speak." He felt thwarted. He wished he could have told her how beautiful she was. In his mind he said to her:

"You're so lovely. Your eyes are like a gray evening in the country, very peaceful and tender. Still sort of warm and comfortable, because the sun's shone all day. Rita. I love you."

The wet leaves in the square past which he was walking caught the light from a street lamp. They glistened with the sheen of moonlit water. A wind

sighed through them. A heavy sense of sorrow gathered within Robert. Love, for him, was not going to be a peaceful, simple fulfillment of natural desire. Already it was a deadly longing and a peril.

"It's Benny, not me," he thought, "and I'm certain Benny likes her as well. She looked at him sort of gently when she said good night. She cares all right." He saw the problem clearly for a moment. The fight, for him, must be one of renunciation. It was not going to be easy for the other two, either.

"Benny won't never do anything about it, 'cos of not being able to keep a wife," he thought, "but she'll do something about it. She's the kind of girl that won't let a thing like a living stand in her way."

The coldness of the night drove him to walk more quickly.

"Well, suppose it's no good worrying," he thought.

When he got to Bollard Street he let himself in quietly. He heard the scurry of mice across the shop floor as his step warned them. He went through the living-room. He stooped down to take off his shoes. Then he stood quite still, listening. Abruptly he went over to the chair in which Rita had sat. He bent down and put his cheek against the back where her head had rested. He thought:

"I don't care if I am being sloppy. I love you, Rita."

Then he put out the glimmer of light kept burning for him. He crept up the stairs. He hoped not to disturb his brother. Benny was awake, however, when he went into the room. He wanted to talk about Rita, but he felt the restraint in Robert when her name was mentioned.

"Is it raining?"

"No. Just a bit damp. I walked back."

He took off his coat and trousers in the darkness.

"Mum and dad liked her awfully."

"I thought they would."

"She's kind of dainty in her ways and manner of speaking, yet she's simple, too. No attempt at putting any of us at our ease."

"She wants you to come with me when I go and see Dick on Saturday."

"That'll be good."

Robert got into bed. He lay on his back with his hands under his head and his knees drawn up.

"Dick keeps asking me to go into the garage with him. I can't make up my mind. I'll have to decide definitely before Saturday. He ought to have a chap to help him. If I could tell him one way or the other he could do something about it." "What's against it?"

"Oh, I don't know. You see I don't believe he'll ever make much money there. The position's all wrong. Besides I'm getting good money at Joseph's. It's a risk changing, and I don't know. I'd go in with Dick if I could put in some capital, but just with nothing I'd never feel like a real partner."

"If it wasn't for me, Robby, you could have got on a lot easier," Benny said.

"Come off it, Benny. What about mum and dad? It was them I was thinking of at the moment."

"Supposing you wanted to get married? You'd have to give up looking after us a bit."

"I won't ever marry."

"What!"

Benny thought:

"Now what's got into him?" He knew by the voice that Robert was deeply moved. He longed to ask him how he felt about Rita, but knew that he could not.

"You're a queer fellow. You've never had a girl or anything."

"No, machines have kept me busy."

"But, Robby, haven't you ever wanted to kiss a girl? I mean haven't you ever felt kind of lonely

when you've heard the other chaps talking about them?"

Robert thought:

"God! I wish he'd shut up. Wanted a girl—Rita, he's got this on his mind 'cos of you. He's never talked like this before."

"No," he said, "machines have kept my mind off them things."

"I've thought about it a lot lately," Benny said. "Here's Rita, she's got a pleasant sound to her voice. I've thought how would it be to, well, be in love."

"Aw, what's the good?" Robert said. "Nobody's happy in love. It grinds you to pieces."

"How d'you know?"

"I've read about it. You've only to look at the newspapers to see what love does."

Presently Benny said:

"You'll be an ass not to go in with Dick. I'm going to sleep. Good night."

"Good night."

CHAPTER X

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Finally, Robert became a partner in Dick's garage. Robert went to Mr. Joseph before he decided and asked his advice. He had been with him for a long time and they liked each other. The shrewd little Jew advised him to go in with Dick.

"You've a fine head on you and you're a worker. You should make good," he said.

So the name of the garage was changed to "Ponting and Baines." Robert tried not to feel elated when the sign-writer came to alter the title. He had not realized just what it meant to be a partner till that happened. He and Dick went out to have a look at it when the man had finished. The scarlet letters with the black outline stood forth boldly. Robert felt self-conscious. He thought that the passers-by must know what had happened.

"It looks all right," Dick said.

"Yes, not half bad."

"It's fine for me," Dick went on.

"Most people would say for me."

"Let's go and have a drink on it. Tommy can fetch us if we're wanted."

So they walked across the road to the Globe. Inevitably the partnership meant that Robert was constantly in contact with Rita. Sometimes she took the telephone calls for them. When Dick was out she would come to Robert with the messages. He had himself well in hand. At times she even thought he disliked her. She had a theory that he was jealous of his brother's obvious liking for her. She saw a good deal of Benny. In some ways she replaced Robert in his life. She was lonely, she had enough money for her needs by living rent free with Dick. The job of looking after the flat for him did not give her enough to do. So it came about that she and Benny went out together. Benny was a good companion. She found that he had a lovely mind. She enjoyed being with him. Essentially the mother type, she took pleasure in giving him the care he required. Sometimes Robert would come back from his work and find that Benny was not there.

"Benny's gone to a concert with Rita," Lucy would say.

Robert missed him. Rita would never agree to let Benny come home by himself, so that Robert would wait up till they came back. Then the three of them would all talk together till it was time for her to be going. Then Robert would see her home. Sometimes, if it was raining, she would refuse to

allow him to go further than the 'bus stop with her. Mostly, however, he went with her all the way. As Rita got to know Robert through Benny, she realized just how good a human being he was. Perhaps no one else quite understood what he had done. Listening to Benny's stories of their childhood and young manhood she came to see Robert as he was. He had fought his way out of the slums in which he was born, yet he had not for one moment foresaken his family. Benny owed so much to his brother's devotion that it was hard for him to appreciate it to the full. But to Rita, as she learned about it, it seemed almost a miracle. To Fred and Lucy he was simply:

"As good a son as ever stepped," as they put it.

Robert thought that she was in love with Benny and that Benny was in love with her. Nothing was said between the brothers about it. Part of the beauty of their relationship was the reserve which existed between them with regard to their emotions. Benny was quite sure that Robert was in love with Rita.

The design of their lives was slowly growing. Full of delicate lights and shades. Its pattern intricate with the subtle difficulties of the situation. It would continue to grow, but its harmony would be

in peril, if their characters were not big enough to achieve its development.

One night Benny was ill. Ever since his accident he had occasionally suffered from headaches. Their frequency had become rarer as he grew up, but they always exhausted him afterwards for a time. Rita and he had meant to go to the Queen's Hall. The worst of the pain was over by the morning. He had asked Robert to say nothing to Rita, as he thought he would be all right by the evening. Mrs. Baines was in the shop when she arrived. She put her fingers to her lips and beckoned her to come near. She whispered:

"Benny's had one of his bad heads. He didn't ought to go out to-night. You try to persuade him not to. He ain't up to it." They smiled at each other understandingly. Rita said in a low voice:

"Where is he?"

"Lying on the sofa in the parlor."

"She's not a fool, thank goodness. That'll stop Benny being silly to-night, anyway," Lucy thought.

Rita walked quietly into the room at the back of the shop. When she saw how exhausted he was, tenderness overwhelmed her. The thought came into her mind that he looked as if he had been crucified. "Is that you, Rita?" he said, and made a movement to sit up. She put her hand out quickly and pressed him gently back.

"You're not to move. I'm so sorry, Benny. Robert didn't say anything. I would have stayed away."

"I told him not to. It's good to have you here. I'm all right now. We'll be able to go to the concert—"

"Not to-night, Benny— I'll go home in a few moments. I'm sure you ought to lie quiet and not talk."

"No, I'm better now. I don't want to be alone. Won't you stay for a bit?"

"Of course." She fetched a chair and sat near the head of the sofa. Presently she put her hand on his forehead and began to stroke it backwards and forwards.

"May I? My hands are supposed to be good for neuralgia," she said.

"It's fine, but it'll make you tired."

"No."

They sat silent while she let her fingers run lightly over his skin. In that half-dreamy state in which he was he wished she might stay with him forever. He thought:

"You're a sweet woman, Rita. It would be good to be loved by you, it would."

Now and then the shop bell tinkled and footsteps vibrated across the floor. Voices, muted by the distance, broke in a murmur against the background of silence.

Benny lay relaxed.

"Perhaps he'll fall asleep," she thought.

Once Mrs. Baines came into the room. She went over to the mantelpiece on tiptoe. Taking up a packet of papers that was propped against a vase, she began to look for an address which she remembered was there. A customer wanted it. She pointed to the gas and when the girl nodded, turned it down very low. Then she went out of the room. She did not close the door properly when she went out. When the next customer came into the shop it swung wide open in the draught from the street. Rita thought:

"If I get up and close it he'll move. It's queer how you can't tell at all whether a blind person is asleep or not. I wonder what his eyes were like."

She leant her head against the head of the sofa. Benny's face was so close to hers that it became only a pale blurred disc in the faint light. The tiny flame in the gas mantle danced up and down. A

moving patch of white incandescence stabbed the darkness. Tenderness stirred her. She wanted to kiss him. A feeling as if her own personality were melting and that they had become one person, suffused her. It was a strange sensation.

The noise from the street sounded louder now that the door was open. Benny never moved. Two customers came in to be served. Robert followed the last one in. Lucy had her back turned to her son as she reached for a tin of condensed milk from the shelf behind her. He did not stop to speak, as she was busy, but went straight through to the parlor. For at least five seconds he stared into the room. Rita did not hear him. In that flash of time, he stood as men who are mortally shot sometimes stand against the impact of the bullet. Then he spun round and almost ran out of the place.

Benny said sharply:

"Who's that?" Rita started at his voice and looked round at the door.

"It's no one, Benny. Lie still."

The shop door bell tinkled violently as Robert rushed through it.

"Why, Mrs. Baines, what be the matter with your Robert? He looked as if he's seen a ghost. It gave me quite a turn," one of the customers said.

"Rita, it was Robert. Run after him," Benny whispered in a breathless voice.

She could not understand his agitation. She got up.

"But, Benny, where—? I—"

"No, of course you can't. It's all right."

She wondered if he had been dreaming.

"He saw us. I know he did," Benny thought.

Robert was walking along Theobald's Road at a tremendous pace. The blood was pounding in his head. His emotion of jealousy was so violent that he felt physically sick.

He was thinking, if the kaleidoscopic torrent of feelings passing through his mind could be called thought:

"So that's how things are between Rita and Benny." He saw them against the retina of his eyes like a projection from a cinematograph. Benny on the sofa with Rita sitting close to him, her lips almost touching his hair, her hand stroking his forehead.

A door swung open just ahead of him. A man and woman stood back to let him enter. The bar was full. His face was so white and the expression on his face so bitter that one or two of the people

standing there noticed it. He found himself close to the bar. He ordered himself a double whiskey. The barmaid served his order doubtfully. She thought:

"Looks as if he'd had enough already. Well, we'll see."

She pushed the glass across the counter to him, still looking at him curiously.

"A splash?" she asked, with one hand on the siphon. He shook his head. He took a deep breath in order to say:

"How much?" For some obscure reason the barmaid sighed.

"One an' four."

He put two shillings on the counter. Then he picked up the glass and drank it off. When she turned round with his change the glass was empty. The spirit ran down his throat, hot and fiery. He grimaced:

"Another, please, miss." He found it easier to speak. He even smiled at her. The barmaid thought:

"His face looks all iron and when he smiles it kind of breaks up."

Robert took his drink over to a table by the fire. He did not know the name of the public-house in which he was. It was a good way from his home. He sat there staring at the shining bottles behind the bar. The barmaid whispered to the potboy:

"Oh, Alf, I wish he wouldn't glare so. It's giving me the jumps. He looks kind of potty and yet not as if he's always so. You know what I mean."

"'E ain't potty and 'e ain't drunk. Leave him alone. 'E'll loosen up arter a bit."

"Alf, he looks just as if he might 'ave murdered some one."

"Garn, he's all right. Maybe 'e's lost 'is job." "Or his girl."

"Garn, plenty more around."

The pot boy was a burly young man who walked round like a sailor. He came over to the table Robert was sitting at. He wiped over the surface with the damp cloth he carried and picked up the empty glasses. Robert went on staring unwinkingly at the bottles. Behind his gaze his thoughts whirled and eddied.

"I've no cause to feel like this. She's never encouraged me and I knew she loved Benny. I've no cause to feel mad about it. It isn't their fault if I care like this. I've got to pull myself together."

The voices around him rose and fell in a rhythm that was punctuated by the sharp tinkle of glasses, the banging of the beer levers and the blare of sound from the electric piano in the saloon bar.

"I must just put her right out of my mind for ever. That's all there is to it."

The door was pushed open and a head looked round doubtfully. Then when Fred caught sight of his son he came across eagerly. He had been in nearly twenty public-houses before reaching this one. He sat down at Robert's table.

"Hullo, son."

"Hullo, Dad,"

"What's yours?"

"Half of bitter." So Fred got up and ordered two beers. He deliberately kept his eyes away from his son's face on his return.

"Mum asked me to see if I could find you. She'd got it into her head that you were ill."

"No, I'm all right."

They drank their beer. A blind man came in, led by a woman. They threaded their way in and out of the people standing around the bar. She pulled the man along a little roughly, so that he stumbled. She kept repeating in a sing-song voice, "Blind, blind, blind," and rattling the coins in a little tin pail. Fred thought:

"Poor devil," and put a copper in the pail. Rob-

ert shook his head. He disliked blind beggars. In some way they hurt him and at the same time made him feel ashamed.

When they had finished their beer, they sat in silence for a time.

"Coming home, son?" Fred said at last.

"Yes."

They went out into the street.

Nothing was ever said about that night by any of the family. Only Benny knew, and Lucy thought she knew what it was. As for Robert, he saw as little of Rita as he could. Sometimes he wished he had not become Dick's partner, because it made it difficult to avoid her. Often he wished he could get away out of England, but there was his family. He buried himself in his work and now and again he wondered whether there was any way of making it possible for Benny to marry Rita.

Lying awake beside Robert that night after Fred had been sent by Lucy to find him, Benny thought:

"I'm in love with Rita, so is Robby. Why's it got to be this way? I love her. Her voice's like a river, at the edge, where you can hear the water rippling against the grasses. She moves about so kind of smoothly, there's no irritating jerkiness about her. And the tips of her fingers, on my skin, why, the

touch is for all the world like an evening breeze. And Robby loves her too. That's what sent him off the deep end to-night. I wonder which of us she likes best? What sort of chance could I have when I'm no use in the world? My God, if I could be like Robby and do a man's job I'd win her. That's what makes it sort of fair between him and me, he's got all the advantages. If I can win her like this I don't need to worry about Robby. He must look out for himself." He turned over carefully, for he did not want to know whether his brother was asleep. He lay there in the darkness with his lids still wide open. He thought: "All that's pretty low down, because I know with a girl like Rita and a person like what Robby is it can't ever be a fair fight between us. For it's just being blind that will give me a start over him. He won't let himself really try to make her love him. He'll feel that things are bad enough for me anyway." He kicked out his foot and Robert stirred restlessly. "Why should we go and get fond of the same girl? Maybe it's just because we're so alike."

He wished there were some one he could talk to about it. The street lamp from outside threw a pale angle of light over the wall by Robert's head. A point of it rested upon his face. Very softly

TO THE VALIANT

Benny raised himself, he leaned close till he could feel the sleeper's warm breath upon his own face. An expression of hesitation curved his lips for a moment, then his mouth grew harder. He thought: "No, I'm damned if I give Rita up. If I can win her I shall." Then he turned over and lay as far away from his brother as he could.

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CHAPTER XI

It was in September the following year that a letter came from Little Elmbury. It was from Mrs. Leekey. She wrote to say that their friend Ben was dead and that none of his relatives could be discovered, would Fred like to come to the funeral? The Baines had not heard from Ben for years. When they received the news they remembered poignantly all that he had done for them. Lucy said:

"Oh, Fred, we have been forgetful of him. Somehow since we finished paying him back the installments of the loan we seem to have lost touch with him. You did ought to go."

"All right." The morning of the funeral he caught an early train to Ware.

As the train swept between fields that, against the shining day, were golden with the uncut harvest, he felt a strange sense of life's futility. He thought: "Here's Ben dead, with only a string of time separating us from him. What's it all about? What do we humans get out of it?" He looked around the carriage. There were three other people in it, a woman with a sickly child and a man who was probably a commercial traveler. The four of them sat there utterly separate and removed from one an-

other. It was only when the child began to cry that the unity of life drew them together for a moment within the same inner world of being.

When they reached Ware, Fred got off the train. The mourning clothes of the poor are always pathetic. He looked too big for the black suit he wore. His face was pale against the tanned skins of the men and women he met in the High Street. He took the 'bus to Little Elmbury.

"I don't suppose the Leekeys'll recognize me," he thought. It gave him a shock to realize this. He got on the 'bus, the conductor whistled shrilly, the driver let out the clutch, and the vehicle rumbled off. It was only ten o'clock; there was plenty of time to spare. The road was familiar, but he found that he had forgotten the actual houses they were passing. By-and-by, when Ware was left behind, he felt less strange. Although he did not consciously know it, there was a sense of homecoming.

When the 'bus stopped at Little Elmbury he got off stiffly. The Blue Boar had not changed at all. The ducks still waddled on the green. In the sunlight they were a dazzling white; the shadows underneath their bodies were purple. A faint breeze ruffled the green water of the pond.

"There's more traffic about now," Fred thought.

He began to walk along the road towards the Hill Farm. He was sad about Ben. He wished Lucy were with him.

When he arrived at the farm he opened the gate and walked up the path. The late summer roses were still in full flower. He could smell the perfume of the stocks. A dog got up from the porch and began to bark. Then the door opened and Mrs. Leekey came towards him smiling. For the moment he did not know her. She had always been plump, but now she was colossal, although her eyes were the same. She smiled in the way he remembered.

"Well, I never," she said, "it's a long time since you were here, Fred. It's a pity you've come for such a sad occasion."

They shook hands. Fred found he had nothing to say. She thought:

"My, he is changed. Such a great healthy fellow as he used to be. That London must be a bad place to live in."

"And how's Lucy?"

"She's very well, and sends her love."

"Well, come along in. A glass of beer won't come amiss."

They went into the kitchen. It seemed much

smaller to Fred than he remembered it from the old days. He sat down uncomfortably on the chair she drew forward for him.

"Mr. Leekey'll be coming along in a moment. He had to go and see the vicar."

"What was it Ben died of?"

"It were a chill. It took him off in three days. The doctor said his heart were bad."

They spoke desultorily. Fred felt relieved when Leekey came into the room, but again he found himself at a loss. London life was so completely different, he could not pick up the threads of this existence after the lapse of years.

By-and-by he and Leekey went out to the funeral. The dog tried to follow them, but Leekey cuffed it and sent it back.

"Would you like to see the body, Fred?"
"Yes."

They walked to Fred's old rooms in which Ben had lived all these years. A little crowd was gathered at the door. Leekey introduced Fred to some of the people. Their names were familiar, but that was all.

He went in alone to see Ben. The coffin stood on trestles. Fred looked down upon the body. The eyes which had gazed so vaguely upon life were closed. Fred was startled to find that, in death, Ben had changed less than any of the people he had yet met in Little Elmbury. A strangled sensation made him want to cough and he clenched his teeth. He thought: "He was the best man I ever knew."

Fred had not pondered about God for a good many years, but he did now. Somehow the body in the coffin made God understandable. In London, unless you were religious, there was only the sound of church bells and the blaring music of the Salvation Army to remind you. He stayed beside the coffin for another five minutes before he left the room. He closed his eyes and said something to God about how good Ben had been.

When the funeral was over, Fred did not go back to the Hill Farm.

"I think I'll walk to Ware," he said. "It'll be pleasant like."

He wanted to be back with Lucy; she would understand. He shook hands with Leekey, and one or two of the other people whom he knew. He started walking back towards Ware. By-and-by he came to a stile in the hedge where there was a footpath which he remembered. He climbed over it stiffly. The path went before him between the fields. The sun was hot. The depression which had weighed him

down all that day lifted suddenly. It was good to be alive, it was good to feel the breeze brushing against your face. A butterfly rose from a head of clover over which it had been hovering. Its wings glistened in the light. On the right of the path was Earl's Wood. Some of the trees were already bursting into the flame of autumn. The blackberries were ripe; Fred left the path to pluck some from a bush. They were sweet and warm. He thought:

"I'll stop somewhere and buy some flowers for Lucy."

Presently he felt tired. He pulled out his watch. It was three o'clock. It would take another hour to reach the station. He knew there was a train at quarter-past four, so he had no time to sit down and rest.

He thought about Ben and then that both Lucy and he himself had to die some time.

Life is too urgent for the poor to think often of death. It is something they keep away at the back of their minds. It means too great an upheaval for them to contemplate it calmly. He thought: "Well, if I go first, Robert will look after Lucy," then: "If Lucy has to go first,—" but he would not let himself think further about that. He stared at the sky instead. It was very blue. He turned round

to look back at the hill on the side of which Little Elmbury straggled; the houses shimmered in the light. The distant horizon melted into a deep blue line.

By-and-by the pathway led on to the main road. Fred sighed. He had enjoyed that walk. He came to a house with a faded notice on the post by the gate on which were painted the words, "Cut flowers for sale." He opened the gate and walked up the pathway. A young, dark-eyed woman came to the door when he knocked. He asked her if she would sell him a bunch. She nodded and smiled.

"You sit down here," she said, pointing to the seat which leaned crookedly against an apple tree. "I'll get a knife and cut you some."

Fred sat down and shut his eyes. He was so tired. The leaves above his head rustled, he could feel pin-points of sunlight on his eyelids as the beams flickered through the moving leaves.

Presently the young woman came back. She had cut him a big bunch of the flowers that grew in the garden, marigolds and asters, stocks and pinks and a great spray of goldenrod.

"The best have gone," she said. "The chrysanthemums ain't any good this year. It's been a rare year for rain and they be sodden like."

He got up and thanked her and asked how much he owed. She said a little diffidently:

"I think sixpence would be a fair price."

He gave her sixpence and went out of the garden with the flowers hanging awkwardly from the strip of bass with which she had tied them up.

A thick mist was rising as he reached the station. He thought: "It will be foggy in London, most likely."

He asked the ticket collector what time the train would reach Liverpool Street as he passed through the gate leading to the platform. He stood there waiting. Mysteriously the mist thickened until it was hard to see across the railway track. The train was three minutes late. Fred was near the front when it pulled up. He got into the carriage next to the engine. The carriage was empty. Fred felt very tired. He took the corner seat on the righthand side of the compartment, facing the engine. He put the bunch of flowers carefully on the rack over his head. He tried to arrange them in such a position that their petals would not be crushed. He sat down and fanned himself with his hat. he took out his handkerchief and wiped the back of his neck and face. When the train started he took out his pipe and a packet of tobacco. He filled the

pipe carefully, packing it with the first finger of his right hand, then struck a match. He drew in several hard short breaths to get it well alight. The blue smoke rose and eddied out of the window. Fred saw that the train was running through walls of mist. It was very patchy and now and again it lifted for a moment. He began to think about Lucy. The visit to Little Elmbury had brought up to his consciousness many things he had forgotten for years. He thought:

"Odd to think of Lucy as a girl. What a pretty thing she used to be. She's had a hard life. We've been happy, though. She's never stopped trying all her life. Earl's Wood. I was a lusty fellow in those days. She were sweet always. She's kept my faithful love since the very beginning. She's a dear."

From that his thoughts went on to his sons. "It's a sad pity about Robert and Benny and Rita. They be making a mess of things. I think Lucy's right—neither of us can do anything about it. It was a bad day when the two of them met the girl. And it was a sad day for her too. For she's fond of both the lads, any one can see that, and what will happen in the end it's hard to tell. I don't see as how Benny can hope to marry her, for the poor chap can't never

keep a wife. Somehow I'd thought he'd have stood back for Robert seeing as how good he's been to him all his whole life. It's not a thing one can judge about, though, for love makes and unmakes humans as nothing else do. It's bad luck on poor old Robert. Maybe I'll try and say something to hearten him. Though his mother probably knows best when she says to leave them alone."

By-and-by he knocked his pipe out against the side of the window. He shut his eyes and presently fell asleep.

Just before the train got to Ponder's End it slowed up for a few moments. Then it gathered speed again and went on into the mist. It thundered through the station without stopping. The next moment a porter on the platform shouted in a terrified voice:

"My God, look, they're for it!" and even as he said the words there was the crash of a terrific impact and the express train from Ware was a wreck. The engine had rushed with murderous violence into a shunting goods train and like a softnosed bullet, it had flattened and twisted itself out. That second of complete horror—the sickening sensation caused by the sight of the train speeding to the inevitable crash, left the people on the fog-engulfed

platform dazed. For a moment they stood mute, motionless and white-faced. The ground shook as the express turned from a glittering perfection of mechanical ingenuity to a black shapeless monster, that writhed as it poured out steam and fire. next instant the onlookers in the station were running down the track towards the accident. station-master rushed to the telephone to call for the ambulance and the fire brigade. Other railway employees ran with fire-fighting appliances. When the first-comers reached the scene they found that the guard of the train and some of the passengers had already started running to the front of the wreck. The mist eddied and swirled. In their ears sounded the violent hiss of steam from the engine and the cries of the injured. The driver of the train was lying dead on the footplate of his engine. He looked quite peaceful. The fireman was on the track groaning with both legs broken, where he had jumped at the moment of the crash. A man stood over him helplessly. The coaches had piled themselves up on the engine until they reached a height of fifteen feet. Twisted jagged shafts of metal and smashed woodwork reared up in the air from the black mass on the ground. It looked like a great heap of rubbish. The three front carriages had telescoped and

the woodwork was incredibly smashed. The front carriage had mounted the hulk of the engine and had bent in half. By some chance the electric light in this carriage continued to function. Its gleams stabbed the whirling fog. Fantastic shapes and shadows danced and flickered in the uncanny light. The rescuers from the station climbed perilously up on to the overturned engine to reach the passengers imprisoned in the coach. Some of the workers began to widen gaps in the sides of the other damaged carriages, so that they could enter. Through the shattered glass people were extricated. With levers and pickaxes and saws herculean efforts were made to free some of the injured who could be seen by the light of oil flares pinned underneath the iron and steel framework of the train. Men took off their coats and waistcoats and in the cold damp fog they sweated at their toil. Some of the helpers raked the fire from beneath the boiler and put it out with buckets of sand. It was two hours before they reached the place where Fred had been lying asleep. The side of the carriage in which he had been sitting had crumpled like a cardboard box. The floor had risen up and then the whole side where he was had slid down beneath the crushing weight of the carriage behind. He must have been killed while he

TO THE VALIANT

slept. His body was a pathetic bloodstained heap of ragged flesh through which the ends of bones protruded pitifully. His head was quite untouched. That made it simple later on for Robert to identify him. By one of those freakish chances that sometimes occur in accidents of this magnitude, the flowers that Fred had placed upon the rack were almost unharmed. They lay touching his cheek. When one of the men who had been trying to free the body caught sight of the flowers, he suddenly broke down.

CHAPTER XII

THE Baines recovered from Fred's death more slowly than is usual amongst people who live on the border-line of poverty. The design of their lives had broken too abruptly. He had been so much a part of the whole. Lucy had loved him vividly. To Benny and Robert he had been an exceptional father and they loved him.

After his death, as Robert went about his work, he thought a lot about Fred. He would see in imagination his father moving about the shop, or sitting before the fire smoking. He remembered how he had let him go into engineering instead of helping in the store, and at a time, too, when he really wanted his assistance. He thought:

"That night when he searched for me, after I'd learned how it was between Rita and Benny. Never a word, just sitting down and being there with me in the pub. He was a good dad."

Then he would hastily concentrate on the adjustment of the magneto he was working upon, or whatever else it might chance to be.

Benny, too, thought about Fred. He used to recall the sound of his voice and the exact timbre in which his moods would be expressed. How at Christmas time in the days when money had been scarce he had said: "No present this year, son." Benny had never minded about the present, but he had minded Fred being embarrassed. Thinking he was a failure, because he could not buy things for them.

And Lucy, well, she was hurt beyond words. During the day she would go about her work and talk to customers and Benny and Robert, but she was all the time cut off from reality. Her mind groped back to the days when she first met Fred. She kept seeing him as a young man working in the fields. She recalled his voice. The experiences they had shared. He had so rarely lost his temper, so rarely hurt her. Even in drink, and that was something that very seldom happened, he had always apologized and pulled himself together when she was near. At night when Lucy went up to bed alone, she would lie awake weeping. Probably it was a good thing that she could express her sorrow by crying. She might otherwise have grown tightlipped and bitter. It was only Benny who knew how she sorrowed. The neighbors thought she was taking her loss wonderfully well. But Benny knew. for at night, sometimes, her weeping was audible to him. He said to Robert:

"Mum's crying and crying, can't you hear her, Robby?"

Robert listened, but heard nothing.

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely certain. She often weeps at night like that."

"Ought I to go to her?"

"I don't think so. We can't do any good and maybe she'd feel shy about us knowing."

"Poor mum!"

After that night Robert began to think about moving Lucy and Benny away from Bollard Street. He thought:

"The shop is getting more than mum can manage by herself. Benny's fretting because he can't help enough. Getting away from all the things which must remind her of dad every minute might be a good thing. Besides, in a new district Benny would need a lot of looking after and it would take her mind off things a bit." He was shy of talking to Lucy about the subject, because he wondered whether she might not want to cling to her old surroundings, saturated as they were with memories. He decided to speak to Rita instead. He had not seen very much of her since that night of Benny's headache. After the accident she had not come to see them

until Lucy had sent her a message by Robert. She had felt the horror of Fred's death, because she understood what a closely knit family the Baineses were. She was glad to get Lucy's message, and afterwards she came almost as frequently as before; but Robert avoided her. Now he asked her advice on the question of moving his family. They were in the 'bus on their way back from Bollard Street, where she had spent the evening with them.

"You see," he said, "we're better off now than we've ever been. The compensation the railway company paid means that mum and Benny will be able to live all right with only a bit of help from me. Then if we sold the shop we'd have enough to get some furniture for a new place."

"I think it sounds awfully nice, Robert, but your mother may hate the idea."

"I know. I'm afraid of that. I'm sure that all the things we've got in the house must remind her of dad. It's bad for her, yet she may just want to have them around. I'd like to get a place where there's a bit of a garden. Benny looks peaked these days. A change would do them both good."

"And you too, Robert," she said gently. "You aren't up to so very much yourself."

"Oh, me. I'm all right," but he felt a warm sense of well-being come over him as he thought:

"Fancy her noticing anything about me." He felt nearer to her than he had done for months. When they got off the 'bus he put his hand under her elbow to help her down. He shivered at the contact. When they reached the door she held out her hand. He took it, and they stood like that a moment.

"I want you to know," Robert began, and then went on haltingly, "that you mean so much to us at home. You've been so good to us."

"Me. Oh, Robert, what have I done?" she said in a confused way. She longed to pull his head down against her breast. He looked so tired and she did not understand the cause of the conflict that was evident in him.

The next night Robert talked to Lucy about his plan. To his great relief she agreed at once. She was fundamentally a well-balanced person, and she knew that it would be a good thing if she could move away from her present surroundings. They were too saturated with poignant memories for her to overcome them.

Benny was glad. They began to look for somewhere to go. Robert put the shop in the hands of a

reputable business agent and they were offered a good price in less than a week. This meant that they must find somewhere to go quickly. After two weeks' hunting, Rita heard of a place in the Chalk Farm district. The Baines went to see it. It was a maisonette in one of those squares that lie between Chalk Farm Underground and Belsize Park Tube Station. It was the lower half of the house, and there was a garden. It was rather shabby, but seemed a spacious place after the poky dark rooms they had lived in for years in Bollard Street. They bought some new furniture. Benny suggested that they should ask Rita to advise them on the matter. Lucy and Robert agreed, and most of the things they bought were chosen for them by her. The house was a miracle to Lucy. It kept her from thinking about Fred too much. Besides, Benny had to be helped to accustom himself to the new surroundings, and this in itself was a task needing constant thought and care.

CHAPTER XIII

Ir was in the following spring that Lily Thomas came to work in the garage. The business was increasing and the clerical side of it had become too much for Dick Ponting and Robert to cope with. So one day Ponting went down the road to the employment exchange and asked for a typist. The manager said good morning in a friendly way. Dick was a Rotarian and served on some of the Ministry of Labor local committees. Because his attitude was human, he was welcomed by the staff. For he did not always take sides against the unemployed. Most of the employers did.

"I want a typist. Someone quite young. Our correspondence is getting beyond the powers of my partner and me."

The manager said: "I'll speak to Miss Morgan and get her to send along the best girl she's got on the register to-day."

A finger of sunshine slid through the high window and touched some of the papers on the manager's desk. He blinked through his horn-rimmed glasses.

"Quite a feel of spring in the air to-day," Dick said.

"Yes, indeed. Makes you want to leave all this and get out into the country."

As Dick left the exchange he saw the usual long queue of shabby men waiting outside to sign on. Some of them gazed blankly before them with the hopelessness of those to whom the future no longer exists. Others leant against the walls smoking and talking amongst themselves. He thought:

"It does seem a waste. A whole lot of these fellows are quite young. What's wrong with everything? All the good done by the Labor Government schemes has been lost again since the Tories got back."

He walked very thoughtfully to the garage. By ten o'clock three girls had come for interviews. He was impressed by Lily Thomas. She was pink and white, with bright hair and full lips. Women might have described her as pert. She answered Dick's questions intelligently, and he found that as well as typing she knew something about book-keeping. The first two girls he had seen were pale spiritless little things, who seemed to find it hard to say anything besides yes and no. He asked her to wait a minute and went out to find Robert. He said:

"Look, Robert, I've got a girl in the office and I

think she'll do. Come and have a look at her before I decide. The other two seemed awfully dull."

"Oh, need I?" Robert said. "She'll be all right if you think so. Tom Commins wants me to have a look at a lorry he's thinking of buying. I'm late now."

So Dick engaged Lily Thomas, and she came to work the next day. She was certainly a little piece. It wasn't so much what she said, Robert decided, as the way she looked. At first he was mildly amused. She was not exactly a bad girl, but she went as far as she could whilst still remaining technically "good." She liked Robert and wished he would take more notice of her. She told her friend Maud about him.

"Oh, he's lovely, Maud. Such eyes. With a wave in his hair. Sort of gives me a thrill. You know what I mean."

"Oo-er- You don't say," Maud said.

"Yes, and he's so polite. Knows how to treat a girl proper."

"Has he taken you out yet?"

"Not yet." But she thought: "He will, though, or my name ain't Lily Thomas."

CHAPTER XIV

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RITA and Benny saw as much of each other as ever. Sometimes Robert wondered why their affair did not develop more quickly. He had adjusted himself as well as he could to the position. He was as much in love with Rita as ever, but it was something which must be kept to himself. He had made up his mind to try and think of her only in relation to Benny.

"You couldn't compete with a blind person," he had decided. "And as, anyway, it was Benny, you just had to get over the thing, and not make a fool of yourself."

What made it so hard was that he still had to see Rita as much as before. He had worked and worked and worked and worked, to try and not give himself time to think about her. But all sorts of little things happened to keep his love aflame. Once he had thought:

"I must get away. I'll clear out of England. That will give me a chance not to mind about her and Benny."

It was just about this time that Benny decided to tell Rita how he felt about her. He did so one Sunday. The two of them had gone into the country for the day. They started off by 'bus for Reigate early one Sunday morning. It was late spring. The sun flooded down. The leaves on the hedges were vivid. The 'bus route passed through the southeast of London before it came to the more spacious suburbs of Croydon and Purley. At that time of the morning the roads were thronged with motors all rushing to the south coast. Rita and Benny sat on top of the 'bus. The wind brushed past their faces gently. When at last they came to the country Benny breathed in the scents eagerly.

"My, Rita, it's pretty good to be smelling grass and earth instead of petrol fumes," he said.

"Yes," she said.

"You know, Rita, I'd love to live in the country. Oh! you don't know how I love the quietness of it." His voice was so intense that she looked around in surprise. She saw that it was some unusual emotion that had stirred him. Almost without noticing it she said:

"My dear."

His ears caught at the tenderness in her voice. He said quickly:

"Oh, Rita, you don't know how I've imagined you and me. Just together in a little cottage. I've sort of seen that cottage again and again. Sounds soft

when you talk about it in words like this." He stopped, and she said:

"Tell me more, Benny."

"Well, there's a big hill. With trees, tall straight trees with heavy green tops that sway in the wind. Kind of stately. Remind you of ships that are full of sail in a good breeze."

She thought:

"However does he know of these things? It must be that Robert has told him what things look like."

She said:

"Go on."

"Don't you think I'm an ass talking like this?"
"No."

"Well, anyway. In the crook of the hill, tucked away, safe and warm, there's a little cottage. It's got fruit trees in the garden, and in the autumn it all smells of pears and leaves and sun. Sometimes, Rita, I see you and me in that place. Oh, darling, don't you know what I'm trying to say? that I love you and want you to marry me. I've no earthly right to ask it, for God knows how I'm to support a wife, but there must be some way, and I love you." He had been speaking in a very low voice for he feared that some one else on the 'bus might overhear him. Very quickly she put her hand over his.

"I've got a little money of my own. Oh, my dear, don't worry. I care about you too, and if you want me I'll marry you."

It was at that moment that the sudden green hills of Reigate sprang up by the roadside.

Rita said:

"We're there, Benny." They got up and she helped him down the stairs. They walked along the road a little way till they came to a footpath that led up the hill. It was hot here, for there was no shadow. Benny took off his hat. The heat of the sun on his face felt good. They did not speak again until Rita said:

"We're coming to where there are some trees. Shall we sit down for a bit?"

"Yes, let's. I want to go on with what I was saying on the 'bus." So she led him off the path till they came to the trees. The sun was so bright that the shadows behind them looked like deep hollows in the earth. Rita chose a spot behind one of the trunks around which the bracken was thick. They sat down. Flecks of sunlight shimmered on the grass. It was very still. A bumble bee zoomed by. Rita looked at Benny. The expression on his face melted her. She took off her hat and sat there with her arms clasped around her hunched up knees.

Benny sat rather stiffly beside her. He was wildly excited. Yet all the time he kept thinking about Robert. She wished he would speak, but he just sat there breathing a little quickly with a sunbeam dancing on one of the lenses of his dark glasses. At last she put out her hand and at once his own groped and found it. Still they sat silent. Then he said:

"Can any one see us?"

"No, I don't think so. The bracken is quite high behind us and we're facing away from the road."

"Rita, I love you so much." She leaned near him and he felt for her shoulders, then put his arms round her till they were quite close and he could kiss her lips. She kissed him back, but even as she did so somehow she felt disappointed. Benny wasn't. He wished she had not moved away from him so quickly while he was still letting his lips search her face. Rita began to talk rather quickly. He wondered if she was embarrassed. Somehow she wished Benny had given her time to think before he had got her to promise to marry him. She said just before they got up to leave the shade of the trees:

"Benny, dear, I hope I won't be a disappointment to you. You know I wasn't much of a success as a wife last time. The man I really loved, years ago, married some one else, and then I married. It wasn't really fair to David. I had only a second-best sort of affection to give him."

"But you love me, Rita, don't you? You said

you did just now."

"Yes, I love you, Benny darling, but I shan't ever care the way I did when I was first in love. I don't want to disappoint you."

Benny laughed happily.

"You won't disappoint me. It'll be the other way about more like."

When they were nearly home Benny felt a sense of depression creeping over him. He felt apprehensive of something.

"I'll tell mum about us, Rita, to-night, shall I?"

"Yes, and Robert." When she said that he understood suddenly why he was feeling miserable. He said:

"Yes, and Robert."

When they got back to London that evening Rita left him at the corner near his home. Benny went on and into the house. As he got inside the front door Robert was just going upstairs. When Benny came in he turned round.

"Had a good time?" he asked.

"I should say I have." Benny's voice sounded odd to his brother.

"Congratulate me, Robby. Rita and I have fixed things up. We're going to be married." Then he listened anxiously for the reply. The stairs and the wall suddenly swept past Robert and he made a grab at the stair-rail. He thought he was going to be sick. Then he said very clearly, and he thought, loudly, although Benny could only just catch his words:

"Good for you. I'm glad. See you later." Then he went on up the stairs. When he got inside his room he closed the door carefully and lay down on the bed. The blood that hammered in his head and throat made him feel muddled. He lay there trying to get his thoughts in order. The first thing he remembered was that he had come upstairs to fetch his camera to take the roll of films out of it. Then the meaning of Benny's words became clearer. He groaned once loudly. He turned over on his stomach and put his head down on his folded arms. Outside an organ played on and on. The sound filled the room and his mind. He found that he was whispering the words of the song, "And I shall love you forever till the day and the night are one." He stopped abruptly when he found what he was doing.

He buried his head still deeper in his arms, but the sound would not be shut out. Downstairs Benny waited miserably. He stayed there in the passage till Lucy let herself into the house with her latchkey. When she saw his face she said:

"Why, Benny, what's wrong?"

"It's Robby, Mum. I got engaged to Rita today, and when I told him he went funny like and shut himself into his room."

"Well, you know as well as me, Benny, that he's bound to feel bad."

"Do you think he's all right, Mum? He's been up there a long time."

"I'll just look in and see." She went up the stairs and turned the handle gently. Robert was standing by the window examining the camera he held in his hand. Lucy looked quickly away when he turned. She said:

"You all right, son? Benny seemed to think you were sick."

"No, thanks, Mum, I'm all right." She waited for a second as if she still had something to say, but the next moment she went out of the room and closed the door. As she went slowly down the stairs she thought:

"Oh! dear, why ever did they both have to go and get fond of the same girl?"

Robert seemed to settle down to the idea of his brother's engagement and spoke about it quite naturally. But both his mother and Benny thought that his expression was harder than before this happened. As for his own feelings Robert had thought about the whole thing a lot. He decided that there was nothing to be done about it, and because of this he began, deliberately, to take notice of Lily Thomas. He felt that it might make it easier about Rita if he could find a friend in Lily. Lily, however, had no intention of being his friend, though she didn't mind him calling it that at first. Once or twice he took her out. He was very shy about asking her. It happened the first time in June.

"Miss Thomas," he said, "I'm going down to Brooklands on Saturday afternoon to see the B.R.C. trials. Would you like to come?"

"Ooo-er- I'd love it," said Lily.

So he borrowed Dick's car and they went. He had wanted to ask Benny to come, but his brother had one of his headaches. Robert was amused at Lily's chatter. She spoke badly, but her voice was not unpleasing. She told him a little about her life. He got the impression that she had rather a hard

time. As a matter of fact, Lily Thomas was more prone to give hard times than to receive them. Her chief grievance against her mother and father was the fact that they nagged her. It is true that they did if she came in much after two o'clock in the morning. This detail she did not tell Robert.

They had a good time. She let him explain to her the details of the mechanism of the racing cars they saw, and she had picked up enough car jargon to hide her complete ignorance from him.

Robert was young. It was June, and Lily Thomas was pretty. These things prevented him from being critical. They stopped for tea on the way back to London. Lily thought:

"My, we're getting on famous. If I'm careful he'll take me out again."

She was right. Robert did, and several times after that. Rita noticed the friendship which had sprung up between the two. In some obscure way she was offended. She was very fond of Robert. Perhaps it was more than that; he had always been so restrained with her that she had never looked into her own mind too closely. She was proud and sensitive, and that made it impossible for her to admit to herself that she was moved by him. Once she said to Benny:

"I can't think what it is Robert sees in that girl Lily Thomas. She's such a vulgar little chit. I wonder he hasn't seen through her."

"Maybe he doesn't want to," Benny said. "He's a complicated person, and terribly proud."

She wondered why he had made that reply.

One day a letter came from Sammy. He had done well in Canada, he said, and could afford a holiday. He wanted to come home and see them. Lucy had always kept in touch with him, and when he heard of Fred's death he had felt homesick. Meanwhile Lily had done everything she could think of to make Robert fond of her. And pathetic enough were some of these wiles. Then one night, or rather morning, for it was nearly three o'clock, she had come to the Baines' house and knocked at the door. Benny heard her first, and he woke Robert up.

"There's some one banging on the door, Robert," he said. "Who on earth can it be?"

Half asleep, Robert muttered: "I'll go and see."

He rolled out of bed and slipped on his trousers. He went along the passage and unbolted the door. Lily Thomas was outside crying. When she saw him she came as close as she could and cried more than ever. Robert put his arms round her shoulders. He felt very tender and protecting towards her, until

the contact of her soft body excited him. He kept saying:

"Ssh, ssh— What's the matter?"

When she felt that his arms were holding her more closely, she stopped crying, and managed to take a handkerchief out of her handbag without making it necessary for Robert to remove his arms. She whispered:

"It's my father. He's locked me out to-night." "Why?" Robert said.

"I'd been to the pictures, and then got talking with some girl friends, and didn't get home until nearly half-past eleven. I knocked and knocked, but nobody in the house wouldn't open the door. I didn't know where to go, so I came here."

For one moment he did just wonder where she had been for the three hours or so since, but he did not ask.

"Well, you wait in the sitting-room and I'll go and wake mum up," he said.

She put her face up to his and the next moment he was kissing her again and again. Lily Thomas hung her head and thought:

"Well, if I don't get him this time I never shall. How his heart do beat."

He made her sit down in the most comfortable

chair in the living-room while he went upstairs to awaken Lucy. She got up and came down to see Lily. It was not in Lucy's nature to think badly of people, but it struck her that the girl somehow looked all wrong. But Lucy was kind. She said to Robert:

"You go and put the kettle on for a cup of tea. I'm sure Lily would like one. She can sleep with me, if she doesn't mind sharing my bed."

"Oh, that's too kind, Mrs. Baines," Lily said in what her friend Maud called her high-falutin' voice. "I don't want to put you to any trouble, I'm sure."

"That's all right," Lucy said.

After that night Robert realized that his relationship with the girl had changed. She appealed to him physically, but he never for one moment pretended to himself that he loved her. He saw that she was a silly little thing without any refinement of character whatever, but he told himself that she was very young, and given a chance, would probably develop into as good a woman as he was likely to run across.

Two weeks later Robert asked Lily to marry him. He thought:

"I know I'm not in love with her. I'll never really love any one but Rita. But maybe it will make things easier if I tie up with Lily."

Lucy tried to dissuade him when he said he wanted to get married as soon as possible, because she felt that the girl would not make a good wife.

She knew that Lily couldn't cook, or even iron well, and that she hadn't an idea how to clean out a room.

"Look, son," she said. "Why not wait a year or so before you get married? Where's the hurry? I make you comfortable here, don't I?"

"Yes, Mum. You know it isn't that. It's simply that I want—oh—I don't know. What's the good of talking? I've made up my mind. Lily's young, and that'll make it easier for her to get used to my ways, maybe."

He thought, "Better to be married quickly to Lily now than to go on hankering after Rita. Once I'm safely fixed up maybe I shan't feel so awful about Benny. I can't go on like this, I know that."

"All right, son. I won't say anything more." She sighed and thought:

"But I do wish he'd chosen a more sensible sort of girl. Now Rita. But there, that's not his fault, poor lad."

When he told Rita, she said:

"Oh, Robert, I'm so glad for you. You've looked

after other people such a time, and now perhaps you'll be looked after for a change."

It was not until that moment that she understood fully her feelings towards him. She thought miserably:

"I wish you looked happier, my dear. She's not good enough for you. She won't understand a bit the kind of person you are."

That night when she was in bed she thought about Robert a long while. Then her mind passed to Benny and herself. She was sure by this time that her engagement to him was a mistake. She knew that she was not in love with him as he was with her. She knew that she hurt him, although so far she had managed to keep him from guessing this, at least she supposed she had. He was so loving and warm-hearted that it was easy in a way to do. But he kept worrying about how he was to support her, and she knew that he would not marry her until he had found some way of doing so. The fact that she did not mind waiting hurt him. He was so eager for her to be his wife. She did not mind waiting. She admitted it to herself that night; she welcomed the delay. The whole thing bothered her, and she turned about restlessly in her bed, unable to sleep.

Robert was glad when the first interest in his news died down. Benny had simply said to him:

"Well, Robby, I hope you'll be awfully happy."

He longed to be able to discuss the matter really thoroughly with his brother, but on this question he knew it was impossible.

He thought:

"Lily's no good; she's flighty and hard as nails. She can't make him happy."

As for Lily, her attitude was expressed by what she said to Maud when she told her that she was going to marry Robert, the day after he had asked her to.

"His mother and brother are a bit stuffy, but I don't believe he's got a spark of vice in him. Anyway, it can't be worse than being nagged at home by mum and dad when they aren't knocking each other about."

"That's true," Maud said. "It can't be worse, and he sounds a bit soft like. You've done well for yourself, Lily Thomas, that I will say."

This conversation took place on the steps of the public baths. Lily had wanted to talk to Maud, so she asked her to come along to the baths. She didn't want to meet any of her other friends; for this reason they went to Holborn instead of St. Pancras.

They arrived early, just before the doors were open. There was a crowd of women standing outside the door leading to the washhouse. They all had bundles of dirty linen with them. Some of them brought it on mail carts. All of them talked a great deal while they waited for the doors to open. Many came from the Italian quarter. They had dark hair and flashing eyes, which contrasted strangely with the washed-out drab-looking Londoners who made up the rest of the group.

At eight o'clock the doors of the baths opened and Maud and Lily hurried in. They got their twopenny tickets at the pay box and ran up the stairs. At the top a cloud of steam floated across the passage from the washhouse. There was a heavy smell of heat and soap and dirty clothes. They went through the door leading to the bathrooms. It was all indescribably dreary. A long passage ran down one side, with a row of dirty windows letting in a dingy light. Opposite the windows were a dozen iron doors painted a drab brown. A woman attendant came through from the sixpenny baths carrying a pail of disinfectant and a brush. She went along the passage and into one of the cubicles. Then she came out and turned on the water from outside with a turnkey.

The two girls could hear the rush of water into the bath which the attendant washed out. When it was ready she came out again.

"Next, please," she said automatically, although Maud and Lily were the first arrivals.

"Me or you?" Lily said.

"Oh, you go," Maud answered. So Lily went to the bath the attendant had prepared. The water was piping hot. That was the only good thing to be said for the place. The walls, which had once been cream, were brown and had peeled with age. The bath was fashioned with a wood surround which had shrunk and warped so much that there were big gaps between the wall and it. A tiny square of flawed mirror was set in the corner. There was also a chair with a cracked wooden bottom, on which you put your clothes. Lily undid her parcel of washing things and undressed. She got into the bath carefully, because it seemed rather hot. It was. She called out:

"I say, miss."

"Who's calling?"

"Number 5. Can I have a drop of cold, please?" So the attendant came along and turned the water on till Lily shouted:

"Thank you. That's enough."

The walls of the bathroom did not reach the ceiling, so that you could hear what was going on in each one. Maud was several cubicles away. The water was comfortably hot. Lily lay luxuriously soaking in it. She thought:

"My, it would be fine if all homes had baths in them like this."

Presently she heard voices in the next two cubicles. Some one said:

"You in yet?"

"No. Sorry I couldn't wait for you any longer. I waited till ten past."

"That's all right. Couldn't get away before."

"Ever been 'ere before?"

"No, 'ave you?"

"Yes, had a sixpenny one morning."

"What's the difference?"

"Don't think there is much, except that you get two towels. Your door lock all right?"

"Yes."

"The last time I came mine didn't. Told the attendant and she said no it never did."

"What, didn't ever close?"

"Yes. Fancy expecting you to have a bath with the door open."

"Well, I never. What a cheek. Do they hurry you here?"

"No, not unless there's others waiting."

"Well, it's pretty empty now."

"Yes, but of course we shan't be able to stay in as long as we did in the other place."

"You in yet?"

"Yes, are you?"

"Yes. Oh, I do love a good 'ot bath, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Wish I could have one every day."

"You a country girl?"

"No."

"What, you a London girl?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'd never have thought it, not you with those rosy cheeks. You look like a country girl."

"Well, I'm not."

"Fancy that, and your skin's so nice and clear and pink."

"Well, it's not put on."

"Oh, no, I can tell that."

"But I do make up at night."

"What d' you mean? Not rouge?"

"Oh, yes, I powder and put a bit of rouge on and make up my lips and eyebrows."

"Well, I never. Whatever for? You don't need it."

"Fellows like it. You know what I mean."

"Oh, it's a shame. You didn't ought to, not till the roses go. They'll go soon enough."

"Well, I don't know about that."

The voices stopped while the sound of splashing took their place. Lily lay still listening interestedly. Then the conversation started again.

"I've got to look for a new room to-day. Had one off Seven Dials, but I left it last night. Stayed out."

"You did? That why you've got to get a new room, because you stayed out?"

"Oh, no. I often stay out. No, I just left yesterday. Went home to see my people first till I met my friend. The boy you saw me with."

"Do your people know you stay out?"

"Not them. They think I'm in service and get in at ten each night and all that."

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"I thought so. You look about that."

"Was that your boy you were with last night?"

"Yes, he's a nice fellow. A street musician."

"Don't you never stay out with him at night?"

"Lord, no. Nothing like that. How long have you been staying out the way you say you do?"

"Oh, eighteen months about. No, two years. Since I was fifteen."

"What's your trade?"

"'Aven't I been telling you? I was a waitress before."

"And you only seventeen now?"

"Yes."

"Don't it get on your nerves? I mean doing what you do?"

"Oh, a bit sometimes. But I don't worry."

"Oh, well, perhaps you're not one of the worrying sort."

Maud shouted loudly just then to Lily:

"You out yet?"

"No, but I won't be a few minutes."

Maud's question must have been heard by the other two, because they did not speak again. Lily listened, then when nothing more happened, she stood up and began to soap herself vigorously. She thought:

"My, only seventeen. I'm glad I'm a good girl. She'll probably be all diseased by the time she's twenty-five."

She rinsed herself in the bath and jumped out to

TO THE VALIANT

get the towel from the chair. She was glad she was going to be safely married to Robert. She thought: "It's just awful the way some girls go on. It is really."

CHAPTER XV

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ONE day Benny said to Rita:

"Look here, I wish you'd do something for me."
"Of course. What is it?"

"Well, I want to find out whether I could learn basket-making or something. The Blind Association would teach me, I believe, and I thought perhaps I could do it here. You see, a good blind worker can make some sort of a living when he's once learnt a trade. If I was only earning a bit to start with I wouldn't feel it was so helpless about you and me, Rita." She was standing near him when he said this. He put out his hand and ran it up her arm as he spoke. He pulled her close and gave her a hard kiss. He thought:

"Oh, God, what's the use? She'll never care as I do. Maybe women never can. After all it can't be the same for them. We're so rough and they have to put up with it or admit they hate it."

Rita stroked his hair gently after he had kissed her. She felt his disappointment at her lack of passionate response.

"Don't worry, Benny dear, it will all come right in time," she said, not knowing what to do to comfort him. "I know, Rita."

There was nothing she could do really. She thought:

"If only I cared about him enough I suppose I'd marry him right away."

"Of course I will go, Benny. I'll go to-morrow." She did, and it was all arranged quite quickly.

So Benny went along every day to learn the trade. Lucy took him down by 'bus to Tottenham Court Road and each evening she went down again and fetched him back. He had never before been thrown together with other blind people. It depressed him rather. Probably, because for years and years they had been with others like themselves, their outlook was less normal than his own. All his life, Benny's family had made efforts to minimize the effects of his lack of sight as far as it was humanly possible to do this, whereas those whom he now saw daily had all their lives considered themselves as "different." Many of them thought in terms he could not understand. For instance, he found that they had no sense of color as he had. They moved in a world that was incessantly the same. The monotony of poverty had intensified the drabness of their lives. Blindness as blindness with them had become rather a state of mind than a physical sensation. To Benny the physical side of his disability remained vividly with him. He remembered always that he could not see.

Once or twice Rita went to fetch him when Lucy was not able to go. She always felt frightened at the misery she saw in the faces of the workers there. It was not that they did not get good treatment there, for they did. It was the way they grouped together, all staring helplessly in front of them. Some of them had no relatives to meet them, and they tapped their way along the street till they came to the 'bus stop in Tottenham Court Road. They would wait there dumbly, feeling the edge of the curb with a stick until some passer-by helped them on to a 'bus. Or till a 'bus conductor jumped off his platform and shouted to the crowd to make way. Everybody was gentle to these people, so kind that it moved Rita in some queer way to see it. These meetings with Benny always strengthened her determination to marry him. She was sure by this time that she was not in love with him as he was with her. All she knew was that she must not let him guess it.

After a while the work that he was doing interested him, and he began to visualize by the feel of its shape what it looked like. The instructors found

him very quick, and he always questioned them as to the colors of the materials he handled.

When he had learned to weave the straw mats (which was what he had chosen to do, because he had heard that the demand for them was good), he ceased going to the workshop and worked at home. Bad as the pay was, he felt happier that at last he was earning something towards keep.

Meanwhile Robert and Lily were having a checkered courtship. There were times when Robert couldn't bear her, and times when her physical nearness excited him. One Sunday on their way back from the country they stopped at a tea garden. Wooden tables were haphazardly set under some of the fruit trees in the orchard. The tops of the tables were painted green. They had heavy iron supports. The seats were just ordinary wooden backed Windsor chairs.

Robert and Lily sat down at one of them.

"Phew! it's warm," Lily said. She opened her handbag and took out a powder-puff with which she dabbed her face. Some sparrows were hopping about in the grass twittering. Robert watched them. When a waitress passed near their table carrying a tray with cups and saucers on it he called out:

"Hi, miss."

The girl didn't come to them, but she jerked her head in their direction and then towards the left where she was going to. Robert went on looking at the sparrows.

"Quite a lot of people here," Lily said. "D'you see that girl over there in the corner, Robert? She's got on just the kind of shoes I'd love to have, real lizard they are. I could tell them a mile off. D'you see the one I mean, Robert?" He nodded, after looking quickly across the orchard. Presently the waitress came over to take their order. She put a white cloth on the table. The wind kept lifting up one of the corners till the tea tray weighed it down. Robert watched the patterns the leaves on the trees overhead made on the white cloth. He wondered why he felt so miserable. Lily poured out the tea. When she passed him his cup she let it slop over the rim into the saucer. Robert hated messiness.

"You might at least say 'beg pardon,' " he said. Lily didn't answer. Instead she took a piece of bread and spread it viciously with strawberry jam. She doubled the bread over so as to make a sandwich, and as she raised it to her mouth some of the jam dripped out on to her middle finger. Somehow it made him feel sick. After a few moments more silence, Lily said:

"My, you're a nice one to take a girl out for a treat. Might as well be out with a mute. Sitting there like a mummy, just staring. Let me tell you that there's a lot of fellows'd like the chance you've got, Robert Baines."

"Well, they can have the chance and welcome," Robert muttered. He wondered what it was going to be like when they were married. He sighed. Later on he knew they would make it up, and then in the nearness of her embrace he would forget this disagreement. He always made it up in the end, because in a way he knew it was not all Lily's fault. She could not help it that he was not really in love with her. Sometimes he almost told her that he couldn't keep to the engagement, but he could never quite bring himself to say it. In a curious way he was fond of her and grateful. She gave him a feeling of security that his unhappiness about Rita had robbed him of. Sometimes at night lying beside Benny he would make up his mind to marry Lily at once, and get out of a position that seemed intolerable. He would feel like that again if ever Benny offered Rita a caress in his presence. But

TO THE VALIANT

other times when he was by himself or with Lily when she was getting on his nerves he became less certain of the need for hurry. The sun spattered down upon the grass and the people sitting beneath the trees. The birds were chirruping gayly. His black mood passed suddenly. He put out his hand and touched Lily's arm gently.

"Sorry I got sore, Lil," he said.

"All right, duckie. Let's enjoy ourselves while we're young. Besides it's a gorgeous day, what with all this sun and the birds and things."

CHAPTER XVI

It was before Christmas that Sammy came home. He arrived at Euston early one Sunday morning. Lucy and Benny and Robert and Lily went to meet him. Lucy was very excited and wondered what he would look like. As a matter of fact he had changed so much that none of them recognized him. But Sammy caught sight of Benny. So he came up to them and said:

"Hello, Mum, hello, boys, I guess this is a good meeting."

Lucy was much surprised, for she had been expecting to see Sammy still much as he had been when he had left for Canada. Now he was over six foot and very broad. When Lily had been introduced to him they went towards the entrance of the station. Sammy said:

"Where do I get an auto?"

"There'll be a taxi just outside," Robert explained, and by-and-by they all entered one, and Sammy's grips were put outside with the driver.

Canada and a certain amount of success had given Lucy's youngest son a sense of superiority, which made him forget the circumstances under which he had left England. He remembered his home as a poverty-stricken place, and he was somewhat surprised to see how comparatively prosperous his family looked. He chattered to Lily gayly. Robert had to laugh inside himself when he saw that she was regarding his brother with what he called her "come hither" look. Sammy talked all the time, and never stopped once the whole of the way to Chalk Farm, except to let them answer shortly his questions.

Sitting round the fire in the living-room that evening he yarned to them for hours. Lucy was very pleased to have him back, and Lily was so obviously admiring that he unbent in the atmosphere. Robert and Benny were glad to see him again too, but they could not help wondering how much he had really changed.

He told them that he had ridden all over Canada and America as a hobo on freight trains. He said:

"Once I had as near a squeak as any I've ever had. I jumped the train this side of the Rocky Mountains. Now most of the railway men are decent enough chaps, but now and again you come across one who's as mean as hell. Anyway, this one I'm telling you about now was a holy terror. He found as how me and two others were on the train, and he told us to git. Well, he just made us so wild

that we determined to stick on that train whatever happened. So when it started we ran along and got between two cars. We managed to get astride the buffers, and that was when the fun began. When we were well inside the tunnel, what with the smoke and the noise and the stuffiness we got almost unconscious like. There was nothing to do except just to cling on and hope we'd last out before we toppled sideways. Say, I don't want never to have that experience again. Unless you've done it you can't imagine how awful it is. It ain't any fun being a hobo, and I only tried it for a short spell."

"You like the life and the country?" Robert asked.

"What, do you mean Canada? I should say I do. Course it's mighty cold in winter. I had both me ears frostbit the first year I was out there. But it's a grand country. I don't know how you folks can bear to live in the crowded old city. It seems so stuffy. But then the whole of England is kind of small after Canada. You should see the wheat fields in Saskatchewan when it's near harvest time. Just like a rippling sea of gold. It's the best sight ever."

Lucy asked:

"Who cooks for you and mends, son?"

"Oh, I do my own chores. Canadian men aren't so spoon-fed as the fellows over here. I guess a Canadian'd feel kind of ashamed if he let his women folk do all the work the way the men let 'em over here. You see, females are kind of scarce in Canada, p'raps that's what makes us treat them better."

Lily gazed at him with ever-increasing interest. She compared him with Robert. As she said to Maud, the next day, in describing his looks:

"He's not so good looking as Robert, but he's sort of exciting, brown and big, with a flame of red hair and blue eyes. There's something wild about him. You know what I mean."

"You don't say," Maud said.

"Yes, and he can't be poor, he's got a lot of clothes, and he's brought a whole heap of presents for his mum and brothers."

"I'd like to meet him," Maud said.

"But I don't think he's your style," she answered quickly, "and his dancing's awful."

In spite of her criticism of his dancing, however, she went with him to the Astoria several times. She was a little afraid that Maud might be there, but her luck held. This might have been due partly to the fact that she had said several times to Maud:

"You know, the Astoria's not what it was. The band seems so dull, and the couples aren't any class. That new place in Camden Town's a lot better, and a lot more fun too, I think."

Maud agreed. Her character was not a very strong one, and she found it the easiest way to get on with Lily. "After all it saved a girl bother not to argufy with people, especially if their tongues were sharp. Besides, Lily was a person to keep in with now that she was engaged to be married," Maud reflected.

London did not agree with Sammy. He hated the noise and the crowds and the loneliness. Above all the loneliness. His longing for the farm life he loved was there all the time. It was only in public houses when the warmth and friendliness induced by alcohol came over him that he seemed to fit in somewhere. When he was sober he was outside it all again, and the feeling worried him. He went about a good deal with Benny. He could not understand now what it was he had disliked in him as a child. He was so gentle and good that he appealed to something in Sammy. Going about with Benny took away his feeling of loneliness. He found that his brother had an insatiable desire to hear about Can-

ada, so he talked and talked and talked. He got some comfort from doing so and it made it seem all much closer. One day he said:

"You know, Benny, what I want is to find some girl who I can take back West for a wife. I've looked over a lot of Lily's friends, but they don't attract me. Now she's really good looking. I kind of guess she's the sort I want."

"I can't see her in Canada at all," Benny said. "She'd hate it."

"Now, Benny, I don't think you've got that girl right. Robert treats her soft. She's the kind that needs a man who'll make her do what he says. Not, of course, unless she liked him, but if she did I think she'd be all right. I guess that most men make the mistake of thinking that all women are alike. Now Lily, she's like a mare: you have to handle her carefully, but let her know you've got the whip hand all the time."

"Well, I don't think Robert will ever treat her that way," Benny said.

"No, I don't think he will either. It's a pity. Their marriage is going to be a mess or I'm no judge of human nature."

CHAPTER XVII

Benny and Robert had talked together about their brother a good deal. They thought that he had turned out a much better man than they had dared to hope he would. There was, however, as they realized, a wild streak in him that might break out any time. His yarns, even if exaggerated in the telling, showed that. Rita saw with dismay that Lily and Sammy were attracted to each other. She wondered if she ought to talk to Benny about it, but after all, what good would it do?

A week before Christmas Benny and Robert were in the living-room with Lucy after supper. She had felt some physical discomfort all day, and now suddenly a terrible pain gripped her. She said:

"I think I'll go to bed. I've got a bit of a pain

in my side."

She went out of the room at once. As soon as she had gone, Benny said:

"Robert, her pain must be awfully bad. Did she look pale? Her voice was queer."

"I didn't get time to see. What shall I do?"

"Get her a hot-water bottle, Rob. I know she's bad." He was so agitated that Robert got worried too. He put the kettle on.

In her room Lucy was half lying across the bed. Her face was white. The pain was increasingly intense and she thought she would be sick. The whole world seemed to be closing round her in a throbbing black mist that was streaked by sudden darts of light. She panted for breath. It couldn't last like this long. But it did, and when Robert came with the hot water bottle he caught sight of her face and then picked her up and put her on the bed. She gave a piercing scream. Benny came.

"I'll run for a doctor, Benny. Won't be more than five minutes."

Left alone, Benny crouched down by the bed. Lucy was trying not to cry again. There was nothing he could do to help. Her fingers kept pulling and twisting at the bed clothes. Then she caught hold of Benny's hand, and squeezed his fingers till he wanted to cry out. He could feel her writhing about as the pain dragged at her inside.

After what seemed a long, long time, he heard the door open and footsteps. Lucy was still conscious. Her mouth was open and she panted for breath. When the doctor touched her she screamed out once more. As soon as that happened he took a syringe from his case and shot a dose of morphia into her arm. The relief was great. Then Lucy lost consciousness.

The three men stood in a group by the bed.

The doctor seemed small and calm and shiny. Robert still shaking from the horror of Lucy's last cry, and Benny picturing for himself the face of his mother lying there still, so still after the violence of the last quarter of an hour.

"I don't know what's wrong. She'll have to go to hospital at once. Sounds like a stoppage from what you told me on the way here. But we shall see. Will you telephone to the Hampstead General for an ambulance? Say you're speaking for Doctor White, and that he's got an emergency case here. It'll mean an exploratory operation to-night."

So Robert went off to the telephone booth round the corner. Benny stood by the bed helplessly. The doctor looked around the room. It had hardly any ornaments in it. Just a few photographs on the mantelpiece. He got an odd impression that he was in the room of an innocent young girl. It was white and austere. He felt Lucy's pulse, as he glanced curiously at the silent man by his side. He wondered how the scene presented itself to him.

Benny had a picture of it all clearly in his mind.

He knew the doctor was small because he could hear the escape of his breath and could tell by this where his head was in relation to his own. He knew that he was neat by the efficient short movements he had made in his examination. Whilst he had been crouching by the bed he had visualized how Lucy was lying upon it.

After Robert had telephoned to the hospital he rang up Rita. When he told her what had happened she asked to be allowed to come round and see if she could do anything for Lucy before she was taken away. He said gratefully:

"I wish you would, Rita."

She came across before the arrival of the ambulance.

She asked Doctor White what Lucy ought to take with her. Then she put the few things he suggested in a bag. She was amazed to find how upset Robert and Benny were. They could not explain how awful it had been before the doctor came. She knew they had loved Lucy, but until that moment she had not realized how much. When the doctor went out into the passage to speak to the ambulance attendant she saw Robert stoop down and kiss Lucy's cheek. She turned away quickly.

Later on that night Rita sat with the brothers by

the fire. It was two o'clock and Lily and Sammy had not come in.

"Look, Robert," Rita said, "I wish you'd let me come and stay here till Mrs. Baines comes back."

"Oh, do," Benny said. "I shall be absolutely lost without mum."

Robert thought:

"That would be a great relief, for I don't know how we'd manage about Benny at all."

"It's awfully good of you to suggest it. If it wouldn't be a frightful bother to you, Rita," Robert said. At that moment, just after his emotions had been so violently aroused by Lucy's pain, he felt only a great tenderness towards Rita. So it was arranged, and she told them she would come back in the morning early. She would not let Robert see her home.

"You go to bed, both of you," she said. "You're worn out."

On the way to Camden Town she passed a couple standing in the shadow of a doorway. They were embracing closely. She did not mean to look at them, but from the glimpse she caught she was almost certain that it was Sammy and Lily. She hurried along faster and tried to put out of her mind what she had seen.

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CHAPTER XVIII

What surprised Robert most was the way Rita fitted into the household. After a few days it seemed as if she must have always lived with them. He found himself looking forward to the evenings with eagerness. There was some reason to go home now that Rita would be about. Benny evidently felt the same thing, for he said:

"Robby, it seems as if Rita had been here for months instead of days, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"She's so quick-minded and fine-minded too, Robert. You know how most people make you feel blind if you are. Well, she just doesn't, but I know she must think a whole lot about it 'cos I'm always finding she anticipates what I want to do."

"How d'you mean?"

"Well, you know how mum sees that my knife and fork are always in exactly the same place, so's I won't have to grope for them. Rita watches out for that sort of thing too. If she sees me go to the mantelpiece for my pipe, then she says 'the matches are just on the right of the rack, Benny.' It's little things like that that make you love her."

Lucy's operation had not been a complete success

the first time and she was to have another in a week or so. She was very ill, but the doctors thought she would recover.

The day she was operated on again, Robert went in the evening to the hospital to inquire how she was. The door porter was sympathetic.

"I'll phone through to the ward and ask," he said. The answer was the one always given at such times. It means nothing except that the patient is still alive. "Mrs. Baines is going on as well as can be expected." Robert thanked the hall porter and went out of the swing doors feeling dispirited.

Benny had one of his headaches again. Rita had made him go to bed. Lily and Sammy were going out. It was that which had really depressed Robert more than all the rest. That they should want to dance when Lucy was so desperately ill. Lily he could make allowances for. After all, Lucy had nothing to do with her. But Sammy, that was different. Surely he could have put it off. But they had been so determined to go. He felt almost as if Lily resented Lucy having her operation on that day. He was not in the least jealous of his brother's success with Lily. He hated dancing, and if they both liked it why shouldn't they go out together? He was quite secure in the knowledge that Sammy was

his brother and therefore Lily would be all right in his company.

When he reached home the house was in darkness. He remembered that Rita had said she was going to see Dick. He let himself in quietly so that Benny should not be disturbed. He walked into the living room and over to the fireplace. He thought:

"Wonder who's kept this fire on. God, I'm tired." He put both his elbows on the mantelpiece and bent his head upon his crossed arms.

Rita was sitting in the armchair. She had not spoken at once because she thought it might startle him. Then in some way it had become impossible. Her heart began to hammer. She got up to try and move away without being seen. Robert heard her and started round. She was close to him. Some inhibition that till this moment had kept him passive was suddenly broken down. He put his hands out to her with a groping gesture. They moved together, their bodies close. The blood rushed to her face. She pulled his head down against her breast. They stayed like that for a few seconds till all his longing carried him away. He raised his head and found her face near to his in the dimness. Her lips were parted. Her head was tilted upwards, her eyes were closed. He whispered:

"Rita, I love you," and kissed her mouth.

They strained to each other closely. Robert put his face down against her neck. He breathed more and more quickly. He felt as if he would die of excitement. Very gently Rita smoothed his hair back. His forehead was damp. Neither of them had said a word. Rita was thinking, "So this is what I really wanted. It's Robert not Benny. Oh! I'm not dead inside at all. Why didn't I know? I feel all melted, like years ago." She moved apart from Robert and went back to her chair by the fire. He followed. He was moving awkwardly, as if he was not quite sure that his limbs were going to do what he wanted them to. He knelt down by Rita and put his face against her neck again. Then he said:

"Do you love me, Rita?"

"Completely, Robert."

"What about Benny, Rita?"

"I can't tell him, Robert. He cares so frightfully. You can't hurt a maimed person because you've made a mistake. I'm certain of that even at this moment."

"But you love me?"

"Yes, darling, absolutely."

"Kiss me."

She met his lips and they kissed desperately. Robert was thinking:

"There's no hope for us. I can't let Benny down either. If it was only Lily I would. She'd be all right, but Benny's different."

He got up and went over to the mantelpiece. He stared at the gas fire. The shape of the flames impressed themselves on his mind. He thought that they were like poplars, and then wondered why he had thought poplars. The tiny spurt of blue flame at the base of the fire trembled and shook. The tears were running down Rita's face. This was unhappiness. This was the sort of hopeless burden you could not avoid. By-and-by he said:

"No, we can't let poor old Benny down. But I don't know how I'm going to be able to go on. It's worse now I know. You see, Lily's only a kind of antidote for you. I've loved you for so long, Rita."

As he talked Rita felt more and more tender towards him. Because of Benny he had to become articulate. She realized more clearly than ever what effect his brother's blindness had had upon his character. His outlook was colored by Benny's idealism, but he was unaware of this. She knew, before he actually said it, that he felt himself irrevocably bound to keep the promises he had made when he got engaged to Lily. After a silence he said:

"You'll help me to carry on decently, won't you, dearest?"

She twisted round towards him and held him fiercely to her.

"You know I will. Whatever you want, you've only to say. I love you so, Robert."

He did not dare to touch her. The nearness of her sent the blood hammering in his ears.

"I'll go away. Just whatever you want, Robert. You've only to say. You know that."

"No, no, don't go away. Surely we needn't think of that, need we?"

More of a realist than Robert, she saw clearly the struggle ahead of them. So she made her definite offer to leave him. If he did not see the necessity then she would not press it further.

"After all," Robert said, "things won't really be any different than before. We've cared hugely all this time and our lives have gone on. The only change is that we know now about how we both feel. That's all, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's all."

"Anyway, we can try and see how we get along.

No need to hurt ourselves more than we've got to. And I'm glad we know, Rita. It'll help a bit."

"I'm glad, too."

They thought they heard a footstep outside the door and Robert started to his feet. Rita could have cried out at his movement. She thought:

"There, that's what it's like. Already our love is smeared by the fear of being found out. As if it was something wrong."

The same kind of thought came into Robert's mind. He walked away from her and stood by the fireplace. He said:

"We won't act differently to the way we always have, Rita. We won't kiss or anything at all. I'll have to think out whether I'd better marry Lily right off or what. It might be the best thing for us all. I couldn't bear you to feel sort of afraid we might be caught. Can you understand that?"

"My dear, my dear," Rita whispered.

"I'll switch the light on now, if you don't mind. It's no good me saying I'm going to keep faith with Lily if I don't start right away."

She realized then, once and for all, the fine strength of his character. Almost amazed, she understood that he was not going to kiss her again. She longed for it, but she knew that he was right. She felt proud of him even in that moment of frustration which desolated her. He went over to the switch by the door.

"I'm glad we know. You're right, we mustn't talk about this again, but I want you to know that I love you, probably for ever. I'm so proud of you, Robert, my darling," she said.

The light went on. She saw by his face how great had been his effort at self-control. She was also pale and the traces of tears were still upon her cheeks.

"We won't be unhappy. In spite of everything, we won't be unhappy," he said desperately.

"No, we won't be unhappy," and she smiled.

"I'm going up to see how Benny is."

"Well, then, good night, Robert. I think I'll go to bed right away."

It was only when she heard him going softly up the stairs that she remembered that she had not asked how Lucy was. She thought:

"And he never said anything either. That just shows."

CHAPTER XIX

SAMMY and Lily were dancing. They started off the evening with dinner at the Lyons in Tottenham Court Road. Lily loved the place. Sammy liked it too. When you went through the big silver doors you needn't feel ashamed of bringing a girl here. The black and white marble entrance hall, the great counters piled high with sweets and chocolates. In the Oxford Street entrance where the flowers were, it was as Lily said:

"A real treat all them blossoms. Make a perfume in the air. As good as a bottle of scent and all. Such a posh place, isn't it?"

Then down the stairs and by the telephone boxes, a dozen of them, all silver too, with the smart girl in scarlet who got your number. Though Lily said:

"Don't you never 'phone from here, Sammy. They charge threepence a call. A bit of cheek, I must say, when it's only tuppence in any of the ordinary call-boxes in railway stations and such-like. Rather a sauce that extra penny. After all, it's a Government service, 'phones and that. You know what I mean."

"Must pay something, though, for all this spit and polish," Sammy suggested. "Spit and polish, of, you are, Sammy!"

And so up the stairs again, past the gentlemen's cloakroom, where you could get a wash and brush up, and a good one too, and up to the Tottenham Court Road side where the Niagara Café, which was open all night, was situated. They always went to that one because Sammy had been to the Niagara Falls and liked the room. A huge barren place of shining tables, nearly always full, with a band that played as Sammy said:

"Just as good as the most swell orchestra in Toronto."

He loved telling Lily about the places in Canada and America which he knew.

"Now I reckon that wall's a darn cute bit of work," he said, the first time when he saw the grained marble on the walls of the Niagara Café. The marble was so chosen and arranged that the grain looked like fir trees standing beside falling water.

The whole atmosphere pleased the two crude young creatures. Besides it was all so amazingly cheap. The wine, too, as Sammy said about the bottle of sparkling muscatel he ordered, was:

"Not half bad, this white fizz. You'd never

know it weren't champagne, Lil, apart from the price, would you?"

"No, I never should," Lily answered, which was quite true. What impressed her about it chiefly, however, was the big pretentious silver pail in which it was brought to their table. After the dinner was finished and the bottle of wine had made them both flushed, Lily took her powder puff and smeared powder over her face. She held up the mirror that was set inside the flap of her handbag. She could just see her face if she ducked her head down a little to the left. After that she took out her lipstick and went over her lips with it. The wine had taken the color all off. Sammy liked watching her do these things, but he said:

"Can't see what you want to make up your face for, Lil. Your lips are pretty red anyway, I should say."

"But a girl ought to try and look her best for the man she's out with, I always think, Sammy. I mean she ought to make the best of herself when she's out with some one she likes. You know what I mean."

"Yes, that's so, I suppose. You know, Lil, if you was in Canada, you wouldn't get time to prink, not if you was on a farm."

Her eyes narrowed a little at his words. It was

the first time Sammy had made a direct reference to Canada in connection with herself. She thought:

"Of course, he mayn't be meaning me, when he said 'you.' I don't know. He's so slow about things in some ways. Especially considering how quick he's been in others."

So she put her powder puff and lipstick back into her bag without answering. As far as she was capable of being in love with any one, Lily was in love with Sammy. She was thrilled by his physical strength and the fact that he came from another country and seemed to have plenty of money. Also, she knew that he had had to leave England for something. She did not know exactly how he had broken the law, but it gave him a kind of glamour for her.

"On a farm we need our women to work hard. Not but what we don't have a good time, too. Especially when a fellow's made enough, like me, to have a hired girl to help if he needs. And then there's dances and socials and whist drives. We don't have a bad time. And it's a fine life, Lil, oh! a freedom you can't get in this old city. There, if a man's got grit, he can get on and make a tidy bit of money, before he's too old to enjoy it. A place where he can have a bit of earth for his very own and make it grow grain by the work of his two hands. Oh!

I tell you, Lil, it's a man's life out there. Look around here and see these little weeds of waiters serving you and me, looking for all the world like a lot of magpies. Say, that's not a man's life. What do they know about real work? Driving a team of fresh horses, that pull your arms nearly out of your sockets, or doing a bit of clearing amongst your timber, that's the labor for a man. Not balancing a pile of dirty plates and only knowing how your bunions hurt. Gosh!"

Lily gazed at him. His words thrilled her obscurely, although she did not understand quite all he had said.

"Your eyes are so blue, Lily. They remind me of the sky above the fields. I guess they're like cornflowers. I'm kind of getting foolish about you, girl."

She understood him perfectly when he said that sort of thing. Praise of her looks by men was what she knew all about. So she put her head on one side and gave him a coy smile.

"You do like me a bit, Lil?" he asked.

She was going to say:

"Well, what a cheek," but instead, almost in spite of herself, she said seriously:

"You know I do, Sammy."

They stared at each other across the table. Then

he shifted his feet till he felt one of her shoes between his. He pressed it hard. Later he called the waiter and got his bill.

"Where'll we go now?"

"There's always the Astoria," she said.

"No. I guess I'm fed up with the place."

"Well, then, what about Cricklewood?"

She suggested there, because it was a long way and he would go in a taxi. She wanted him to kiss her a lot and he would be able to.

"All right."

They took a taxi. When it had started Lily waited for him to pull her to him. Instead he sat back in his corner. Presently he said:

"Lil, I want you badly, you know that. I'd just like to marry you and take you along with me to Canada. I'll have to go back right soon now. Lil, if you was free would you come with me?"

"I would, Sammy. You didn't ought to have had to ask me that. Ain't I showed you that I love you?"

"Well, a fellow's never sure just what a girl means, Lil. I had to make sure. We're in a mess, Lil. If you wasn't Robert's it'd be easy. We'd just run off. But he's my brother, and it seems sort of mean to do it."

"Oh, Robert," she said, "he's such a stick. Don't think he'd mind much, Sammy. He ain't really in love with me. Never has been."

"Why d'you think that? He's good to you, it seems to me."

"Yes, he's good all right. Almost soft like. But I know he ain't crazy about me. A girl can tell. Never could make out exactly why he wants to marry me. Sometimes I've thought it may be some other let him down."

"Well, Lil, I don't know what to do, and that's a fact. I'll have to kind of chew it over and make up my mind. I wants you, Lil."

She swayed towards him and he seized her in a rough embrace. His strength and the very crudity of his nature thrilled her. By-and-by, he let her go and sat back in his corner.

"Wonder how you'd fit in on a farm?"

"Not so bad as you might think, Sammy. You see father was an Australian. Came over here in that there Great War. He was on a sheep farm or something before he joined up. He stayed on 'ere instead of going back and married ma. He used to tell us about his life as a boy. Didn't sound 'alf bad to me. Sort of free like, you know what I mean."

"Yes. I guess it's free all right."

When they got to Cricklewood they went into the hall. They danced until the place closed. They did not speak much. Lil knew that Sammy was thinking about how he could get what he wanted. When they came out the moon was shining.

"How d'you feel about walking a bit of the way home?" Sammy suggested. After a while he said:

"Say, I wonder how mum's operation went off to-day?"

"Oh! I expect it was all right." Lily had been careful not to remind Sammy about it earlier, in case it should have made him suggest putting off going on to dance after dinner.

"Wish I'd remembered it before. I haven't been much of a son to mum. That's one of the things that's keeping me from running off with you, Lil. It isn't only Robert. Oh, darn it all, I don't know what to do!"

Lily did not answer, she simply squeezed his arm, which was through hers. She was content to leave it to Sammy. What he told her to do she would do. It was quite simple as far as she was concerned.

CHAPTER XX

AFTER Rita went to bed that night the exaltation which had sustained her through the evening passed. Reaction swept over her. She knew she would not be able to match Robert's example of self-control. She knew that if she was unable to do that, she would fail him horribly. Friendship between them, she told herself, was out of the question. She was in love with him. She wanted the expression of that love. Robert's strength, she was aware, must be profound. He had proved it to her completely by his decision not to kiss her again. She wondered how many men in the same circumstances would not have come back for a last embrace. She loved him for his self-restraint, but she understood that she herself did not possess it. For a little while her tears were bitter. The agony of seeing him with Lily, of having to pretend to an indifference, now that she knew their love was mutual, she knew she could not bear. She thought:

"It's no good. I must go away. I'll write to him. He'll understand. Even if it is failing him, it's better than staying and failing him still more by my weakness. We shall be thrown together too intimately. I should hate myself if I made it difficult for him to be faithful to Lily. If only he hadn't been so blind. If only I had been less cowardly." Once having made up her mind to go she felt a little less hopeless. It was some comfort to her to find that she had enough resolution to make this decision. She felt herself nearer to Robert's brave attitude towards life.

The next day when Robert had gone off to his work she went to Benny. He was still in bed, but his headache, he told her, had quite gone.

"Robert went to the hospital early this morning. Mum's much better. Isn't it grand?" he said.

"Oh, I am glad, Benny." Rita looked at his sensitive hands which lay on the counterpane. She put one of hers over his.

"Look here, Benny, I can't stay here any longer. I want to go away to-day. It sounds as if I'm failing you. I suppose I am in a sense, but it's all so urgent and I can't explain. Oh! Benny dear, say you'll forgive me for leaving you in the lurch like this."

He turned his hand around in hers till he could clasp it. He didn't understand what was wrong, but he did understand the strained urgency in Rita's voice. So he said:

"That's all right, darling. You don't have to tell

me anything you'd rather keep to yourself. And don't be unhappy. Life's a queer game. Mostly things seem to work out better than one expects. As long as we try to meet what comes with courage, then things seem somehow to turn out all right in the end."

She thought: "Courage, well that isn't what you've lacked, Benny."

"Thank you, my dear. I needn't have been afraid you'd be hurt," she said.

"You want to go away to-day?"

"Yes."

"Shall I say you've had a letter asking you to go suddenly, or something?"

"Yes, please, that would be best. I'll let you know my address, Benny, when I know it myself."

She bent down and he held her to him. The thumping of his heart close to her own reminded her of Robert and the night before. Then Benny kissed her with passion and she knew once and for all that she could not bear this between them. She did not know what to do so that he would not realize how she felt. She managed to respond a little, and not to draw herself away too quickly. By-and-by he let her go and she said good-by and left the room. He called after her:

"Would you mind asking Sammy to come in here, Rita."

"I will."

She packed her bag and sent Sammy to Benny before she left. A few days later Rita wrote to Robert. He got the letter when he came home from work. Lily was waiting in the hall when he opened the front door.

"Oh, here's a letter for you, Robert. Who's it from?"

"I don't know, but it may be from Rita."

"Well, aren't you going to open it? My, it's a fat one. Not sure I oughtn't to be jealous."

"Don't be silly, Lily," he said sharply. She laughed in a way that jangled on his nerves. Benny called from the chair by the fire:

"Robby, there was a postcard from mum to-day. She says she'll be back in a few weeks' time now."

Robert absent-mindedly opened Rita's letter; then stuffed it into his overcoat pocket. He wondered when he would get a moment alone to read it. He said to Benny:

"My, it's ripping to hear that. I saw some grapes at Durrant's that looked good, so I bought a pound. Thought I'd go up to hospital with them after supper."

As soon as the evening meal was over Lily said: "I'll wash up now." Robert and Benny felt surprised. Washing up was not one of the things that Lily generally volunteered to do.

"I'll come and help you, Lil," Robert said.

"No, I'll get through quicker by myself. You stay here and smoke." Once outside the room with the tray it hardly took her a moment to get Rita's letter from Robert's overcoat. When she had read it her mouth smiled a little slyly.

Later on that night Robert got back from his errand to find that Benny had gone to bed. The house was very quiet. He went into the sitting-room and sat down at the table. It looked desolate and untidy. He felt hopelessly depressed. Then he took Rita's letter from his pocket and read it. She wrote in a rather big angular hand. There were six pages, written on both sides. He read it quickly, hungrily, then he turned back to the front page and read it all over again. Rita had spared herself nothing. He understood her agony of longing and desire completely. After he had gone through it for the third time he put his face down on his hands, with the letter resting against his cheeks. He said aloud:

"My darling, darling girl. I love you too, just

the way you love me. I want you physically, the same way as you want me. I always have. I love you, Rita."

His voice sounded loud in the empty room. He rose and put the letter on the fire, after he had torn the address off the top first. He waited there until the last corner had faded away into gray ashes that fluttered in the draught. He could see the faint outline of Rita's writing on the burnt sheets, that still retained their shape. He put the toe of his boot upon them in the fire so that they crumbled away. He wanted to write back to her. To tell her he did not know how to bear this love for her, but he would not give in. He felt that it was unjust to her to imply that there was any kind of a bond between them. He wrote instead a short note telling her how Lucy was. At the end he said: "Benny and I miss you awfully, Rita. It was good of you to write as you did. I can't thank you or answer it, so I won't try. Love, Robert."

Lucy came back. In a few weeks it seemed as though she had never been away. She was, however, deeply worried in her own mind about Sammy and Lily. She wondered if Robert suspected anything. He looked rather tired, that was all. She found it impossible to say anything to him.

Sammy decided suddenly to go back to Canada. He had made up his mind what to do about Lily. The old feeling of being out of it in his own family had overtaken him again. Lucy, Benny and Robert, they were so much a complete whole. He felt that Lily would remain for ever outside the picture too. Well, he wasn't going to let her, that was all. So he asked her definitely, whether she would come away with him and she had emphatically said "yes." He arranged to leave from Liverpool on Friday. The boat would sail on Sunday. Lily was going to meet him in that city on Saturday. He got her ticket for the railway and gave her some money. The night before he went they took a walk on the Heath together. They stood high up, looking towards the bright glare that hung over the city. Sammy put his arms around her fiercely.

"Listen," he said roughly, "you'd best get this clear right now. I love you and I'll marry you. That's a promise, but if ever you fail me, by God, it'll go hard with you; d'you get that? Robert's been too soft with you. He's let you have your own way. I shan't. Do you understand? You be faithful to me and I'll be faithful to you. But if you're not—well, look out, that's all."

For answer she put her arms round his neck and kissed his mouth.

"I'll meet you on Saturday all right. I'd rather have you as you are than twenty Roberts. I love you."

The day came for Sammy to depart, and the Baines family went to Euston to see him off. Lily went with them. When he kissed Lucy good-by she held him closely. She knew that it was unlikely that he would come home again whilst she was still alive. When they moved apart tears filmed her eyes. Sammy looked serious, as if her unspoken emotion had found a response within him. gripped hands with Robert and then went to Benny. The intimacy of brotherhood, that somehow Sammy had missed all his life, swept him for this moment within its bond. He loved Benny, and saw for the first time the pathos and courage of his life. The feeling that the knowledge brought was unbearable. Amazingly he wished that he could kiss Benny. He took his hand and shook it. His voice sounded husky as he said:

"Good-by, old fellow. Take care of yourself. Here's all the best."

"Good-by, Sammy. Be sure and write some-

Then Sammy turned to Lily. He wished in that moment that she had been engaged to any one in the world rather than to Robert. There came into his mind that old memory of stealing the tire gauge in Mr. Joseph's garage. He saw Robert plainly, boyish and fair, and heard him saying:

"You dirty little thief." His mouth grew hard. He thought: "But you're no one's property, Lil. You're a human being." Lily, believing he looked like that because he was conjecturing what he would do if she failed to follow him, thought:

"Oo, I wouldn't like to 'ave 'im for an enemy, I wouldn't."

After they had shaken hands, there was nothing to do but stand around and try and make conversation till the train left. Sammy looked at his watch, wondering if there was still time to get a drink at the bar. Just then the shout went up of "Take your seats, please." A weight lifted from his mind. He turned round and jumped into the compartment in which he had reserved a seat. He came to the window. He felt suddenly gay. He looked upon the little group whose faces were turned up to his. Lucy, pale and thin, with an expression that the fortitude with which she had borne her life, had carved upon it. Robert, tall and so good looking,

that Sammy wondered for a moment why Lily preferred himself. Benny, with his black spectacles forever preventing the world from having a complete conception of his face. And Lily, brightly pretty. Blue eyes, pouting red mouth, immature figure. Well, she would be with him by to-morrow night. They would be on their way to Canada. Back to that life he loved. Free of the stifling contact of cities. Amongst people whose aims were clear, whose outlook upon life was simple. He longed for the horizon that was really distant; for the companionship of his horses and dogs. He looked at Lily again and desire leapt in him. He thought:

"Gosh, I'm glad I came home."

Almost before the shrill note of the whistle that gave the departure signal had died away, the train began to slide out of the station. Sammy stood at the window waving, till the little group on the platform became one of many other little groups, who were all making the same gesture. A wave, which seems to desire to hasten departure rather than delay it.

When the train had left, the Baines walked out of the station. That flat feeling was upon them which always comes to people who have seen off on a journey some one they care about. Lily was very quiet, Benny noticed. Robert put his hand through her arm as they walked towards the 'bus stop.

"You feeling all right, Lil?" he asked.

"No, I don't know what's come over me all of a sudden. I feel sort of shaky and sick."

"Well, you'd better go along home. I'll explain to Dick you feel queer," he said. "I'll try to get round this evening after we're closed." So Lily went off to her home and Lucy and Benny took the 'bus to Chalk Farm and Robert went to work.

That evening a boy brought a note from Lily saying that she had the 'flu and wouldn't be able to work for a day or two. Robert wasn't in when the note came, and then when he rushed in to supper he explained that one of their best customers had smashed his car in the country and wanted it fetched back to London.

"I'll have to start to-night to get to him in time for him to start out to-morrow morning in the car we're lending him," he said. Then he asked Benny if he would find out how Lily was the next day. Benny said he would do so.

Benny went round to Lily's house early the next day. The house she lived in with her parents was shabby and derelict looking. When he got there the children were all in school and the street was silent. He went along slowly, his stick tapping occasionally against the railings in front of the houses. When he thought he was nearly there he stood still and waited until some one came along. When they had come abreast of him he asked:

"Am I near number seventeen, please?"

"You're only a step or two away, mate," and led him to the entrance.

"Thank you."

"That's all right."

Benny went up the steps. When he got inside the front door he thought for a moment that the house was empty, it was so quiet. He knew where Lily's room was, so he went along the passage till he came to her door, which was open. Lily was sitting by the window with her back towards him. She was writing a letter to Robert. Benny stood quite still at the doorway listening to her pen scratching over the paper. She gave a violent start as she turned and saw him. Her trunk was standing ready locked in the middle of the room. Her suitcase was lying still open on the bed. Lily stared at him, with her hand pressed against her mouth. She forgot for the moment that he was blind. When she remembered

she took her hand away from her mouth and said:
"Oo, what a start you gave me, Benny. Whatever is the matter?"

He walked carefully into the room as if he was not quite certain that he might not trip over something. He felt for the bedpost and when he had found it he stood quite still looking towards her. He said:

"Robert asked me to come along and see how you were. He had to go off to a breakdown in the country last night."

"Oh! I feel better to-day. Will you tell him that?" She moved towards him and kicked the trunk in passing. Benny felt mystified. He could not visualize the thing she had knocked against. He was still holding on to the bedpost, and now he moved round until he was able to sit down on the side of the bed. Almost at once his hands encountered the suitcase that lay there open. Lily wanted to scream. She said breathlessly:

"What d'you want, Benny, I'm busy."

"I thought you said you were ill, Lil."

His hands were feeling around the edge of the suitcase. When he came to the locks he understood.

"Where are you going, Lily?"

"That's my business," she said shrilly.

Benny got up suddenly and moved towards her. As he came she walked slowly backwards to the window. He slid one foot in front of the other very cautiously until he reached the trunk. He bent down and felt what it was with his hands. After he had touched the label he got up and moved round the trunk and towards Lily again. She was huddled up against the window.

"What's your game, Lily? Where you running off to?" She turned on him then.

"Well, if you must know, Benny Baines, I've chucked your lovely brother Robert. I'm going to some one who really wants me and's a man."

"Who?"

"That's my business."

"Who?" His voice was suddenly harsh.

"Well, it's Sammy if you must know."

"Why?"

"Haven't I told you already, because he wants me and I want him and he loves me and Robert don't, the deceitful beast, that's why."

"Stop, Lily. I won't stand for you saying things about Robert."

"Oh! you won't stand it, won't you? Think I'm not good enough, I suppose. Well, let me tell you, Benny Baines, that he's no better than me. Carry-

ing on with your own girl under your very nose and pretending he's so mighty good."

When she had said that she wished she hadn't, because Benny just stood there staring with his face white and set. Just because she felt she had done something wrong she went on blustering and raving, and from what she said he pieced together that she had read a letter of renouncement from Rita to Robert. Suddenly he got up from the bed. As he found his hat and stick he could hear Lily weeping noisily.

"What are you going to do, Benny? I'm sorry for what I've let on. Don't take it to heart, Benny."

He shook his head impatiently and moved to the door. Lily went on:

"I love Sammy, I do, and I must go to him.

What are you going to do, Benny?"

"Well, one thing's certain, that I'm not going to do anything to stop you going off with Sammy," Benny said, and left the room.

After he had gone Lily hastily locked up her suitcase. Then she put on her hat and coat and ran out to fetch a taxi to take her to Euston.

CHAPTER XXI

THERE was a swift wind blowing. The dust from the street rose up and gritted against Benny's teeth as he came out of the entrance to Lily's house. He thought:

"I must walk along a bit and get this straight. I don't understand." In his agitation he lost his bearings. He didn't care where he was going anyway. When he came to where the pavement ended at a cross road he waited till some one came along and led him across. He wondered whether he was walking in a wide circle. Well, anyway, it didn't matter. He knew now that Rita would never love him, he knew why. He knew that he had always known it really. The way he was taking led him out of London towards the Northern suburbs. At last he had walked as far as Edgeware. Suddenly the houses fell away. Trees and hedges took their place. He was tired, but too unhappy to feel his weariness. He sniffed the sunny air. The sky was a very pale blue. He sniffed the air. He thought:

"I must think this thing out." He remembered everything that Lily had poured out in her anger. One thing he was clear about, the letter she had read

showed that Robert and Rita had not let their love for each other make them disloyal to him.

He felt very tired. His emotion had exhausted him and he had walked a long way. He felt with the aid of his stick for a place where he could sit down by the roadside. Presently he came to a place where the grassy ground ran back from the road. He walked carefully upon it until he found a spot where he could rest. He sat quite still for some time. His rage against the futility of his maimed existence and revolt against the pain of his loss of Rita had sunk down to a feeling of heavy misery. He began to think about his brother and Rita and their unhappiness. His throat stung with pity for them. He thought:

"How good Robby's always been. He even gave way to me in this thing." He knew that he had tried to win Rita at his brother's expense. He admitted to himself now that all the time he had known the injury he was doing Robert. He had safely relied on his chivalry. Rita too, he knew now that he had played on her pity and generosity. He thought:

"My God, I've been pretty caddish one way and another."

A desolating sense of loneliness swept over him.

He sat utterly still, suffering. One or two people who passed along the road peered over their shoulders at him, curiously. Presently the peace of the fields and air and fluting birds touched his consciousness. The gentle kindliness of it comforted him a little. Suddenly he remembered that Lucy would be worrying about his absence. He got up. His left foot was blistered. He limped to the edge of the road. He did not know where he was. He waited there patiently for some one to come along to direct him. A motor car which had passed earlier when he was sitting down came back along the road. The driver was a gray-haired woman. When she saw Benny she stopped the car and called out to him:

"Can I give you a lift?"

"I want to get back to London but I don't know which way it is."

"What part of London?"

"Near Chalk Farm Station, that's between Hampstead Heath and Camden Town."

"Yes, I know it. I'm going that way." She got out of the car and taking him by the arm helped him in. He knew by the way she had assisted him without seeming to do so that she was a sensitive person. Once or twice as they went along she glanced at

him. She wondered what bitter experience was torturing him. She could not bear to see the way his hands were clenching and unclenching. At last she said:

"Look here, I don't know what your trouble is and I'm not asking you, but I'm old enough to have learned that even the pain of loss becomes bearable in time."

For a moment Benny was afraid he was not going to be able to answer her without breaking down. He took a deep breath and said:

"It's the loneliness that losing some one gives you that's so awful." She drove the car over a rough piece of road carefully before replying, then she said:

"Loneliness is so common and so many-faced. You, my dear, must be used to one kind already. I should think by the look of you that you've made your defense against it."

"You mean because I'm blind. It's just because the person I've lost was part of what you called my defense that it's so horrible."

She said softly:

"It makes me feel crude and insolent trying to offer you comfort when I am old and you young. How can I know the intensity of your pain?" "Yet somehow you are helping me, you know," he said.

"Will you believe me if I tell you that there's one thing age does teach, and that's the fugitiveness of mental agony."

"You mean that it doesn't last very long, so that if one can hold out—"

"Yes, and one can. I suppose remorse is the emotion that takes longest to get over." She saw that her last words had startled him.

"Why remorse?"

"Well, perhaps it's because that implies that one has hurt some one else."

He thought:

"Well, anyway, thank goodness I'll be able to make it all right with Rita and Robby. There's no reason now why they shouldn't be happy."

When they got to Hampstead she said:

"Will it be all right if I drop you at the Tube Station at Chalk Farm?"

"Yes, thank you."

When they got to the station she stopped the car and helped Benny out. She put out her hand and gripped his. He said in rather a muffled voice:

"It's no good my trying to say 'thank you.'
You've helped me a lot."

She did not reply because there didn't seem anything to say. She just held his hand a little closer. Then she turned away and got back into the car. Benny waited there till he heard it move off, then he put his hat on again and started off to walk home.

When he got to the house Lucy was watching for him at the window. She had thought he must have been run over. Still weak from her illness she cried with relief when he reached her. Benny put his arms round her. By the time she was soothed and he had made her sit down he was calm himself. After tea he said suddenly:

"Mum, d'you think you and I could go away somewhere for a bit? It would do you good to have a change and I want to get right away too."

"Why, what's the matter, son?"

So he told her that Lily had run away to Sammy and that Rita and Robert were in love with one another. He sat on a low stool by Lucy's chair and leaned his head against her skirt. Lucy never spoke very much when things went wrong. That was one of the qualities her sons appreciated in her. Words she had found were small coin to give in exchange for confidences. But she agreed to go away with Benny as he desired, although she would really have rather rested in her own home. She was so tired.

TO THE VALIANT

She had already gone to bed by the time Robert came into the house. Benny was waiting for him. As soon as Robert had finished his supper Benny told him in flat quiet tones all that had been revealed to him that day. Robert sat quite still with his head resting on his hands. The poignancy of Benny's experience and his renunciation so moved Robert in the end that he could only beg Benny to forgive him.

"There's nothing to forgive on my side, that you know, Robby. I'm going to be all right. So don't you worry."

CHAPTER XXII

ROBERT did not write at once to Rita. He waited for a week until Lucy and Benny had left for the country. The old protective love for his brother swept over him again during that time before they went. So that even the knowledge that he and Rita were now free was not free from bitterness. After a day or two alone, however, the joy of being able to go to Rita became real to him and he took a day off from work to go to her.

Rita was staying in Chinnor. The tiny village nestled at the foot of a sudden rise in the Chiltern Hills. It was a mild day in January, a day that seemed to hold in its soft yellow sunshine and faint breeze a promise of spring.

She thought often of Robert. His answer to her letter had been like him. Before she obtained a complete enough victory over herself to make friendship possible between them, she knew there was a long and bitter fight ahead. She thought:

"But I'll not see him again before I've won. He's so fine a person; I must try and be decent too."

That noon she went for a long walk upon the hills. The narrow chalk path wound up between the black stark hedges. Far above towered the downs. Over the ridges and dipping in rich curves were the beech woods. The path wound up and up. Rita turned a corner; the shoulder of the down above seemed like an animal and the thick woods covering it, its fur. The path led out suddenly on to a wide green ledge. The grass was short and fine. The fields dropped away in abrupt slopes. The plowland was chocolate brown, with flecks of white chalk showing in the furrows. Rita looked across the wide view. The country spread before her spaciously. She saw two hares loping over a field. They were quite near her. The distant woods, vaguely blue, melted into the horizon. Strips of bright green grass ran between the fields, dividing one from the other. The sky was a tender exquisite color. She was filled with emotion at the beauty around her. A high gorse bush on her right made a shelter against the wind that blew across the downs.

She heard footsteps running. Then she saw Robert coming towards her. He had seen her moving high up on the pathway as he had driven up the road towards the village. When he had gone in the car on the track as far as the soft ground would let him, he had jumped out and followed her up on foot.

Rita thought:

"My God, why has he come?" and then within

TO THE VALIANT

her rose a wave of happiness, for she knew that his approach meant that something had happened to make their separation no longer necessary. When he had almost reached her she walked quickly towards him and they moved together in a hard embrace. The down rose high above them and the earth rolled away steeply below them. For a moment, in the tumult of their love, existence became timeless. Then the echoes from the distant village reached their ears and drew them back once more into the design of Life.

THE END









